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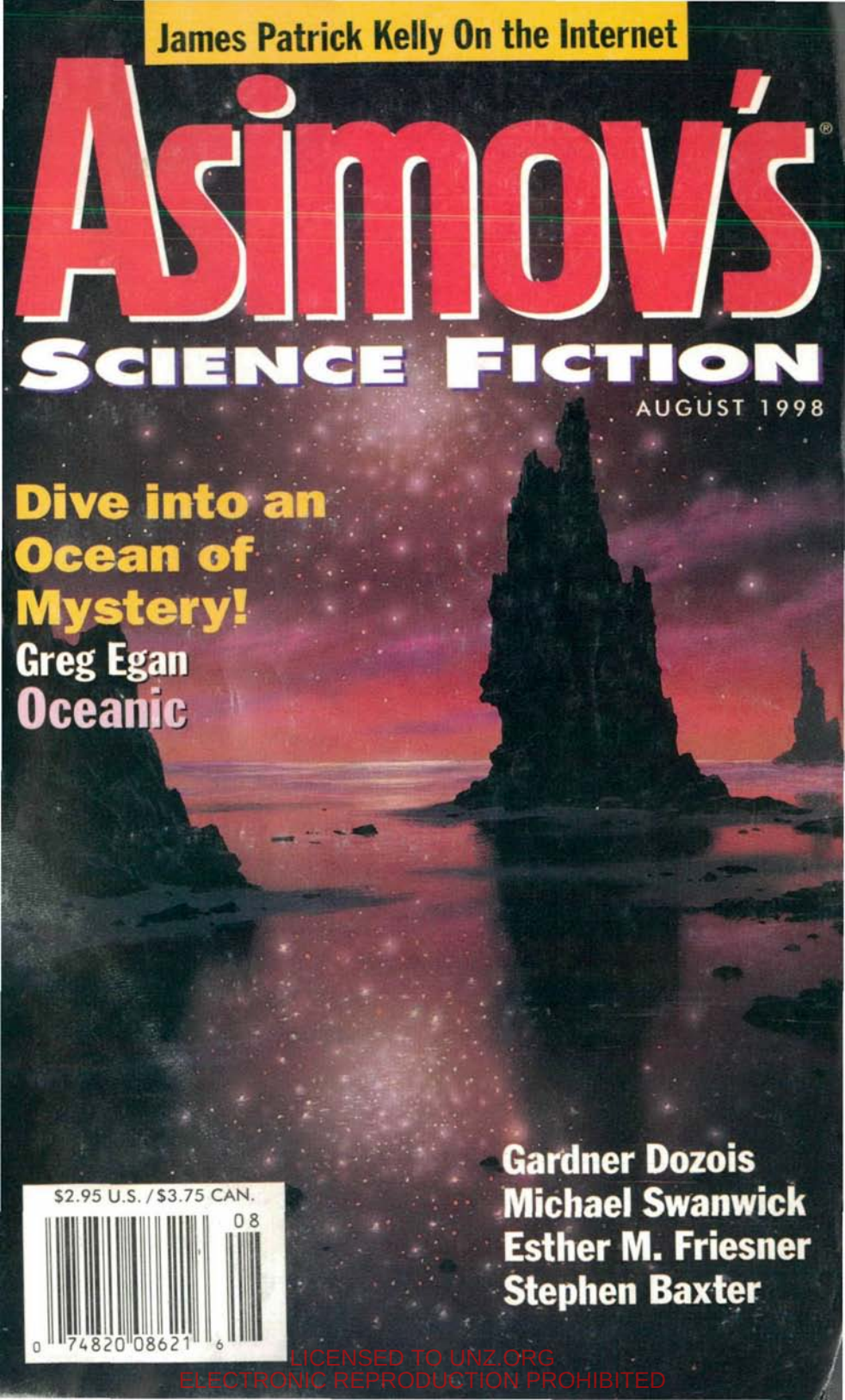

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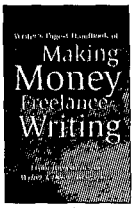

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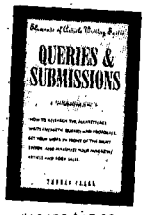

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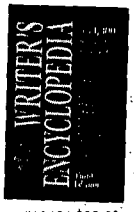

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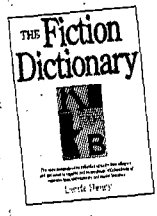

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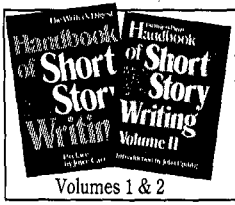

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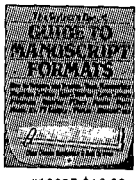

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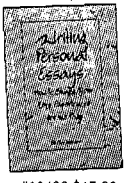

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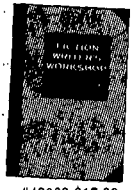
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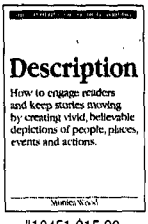
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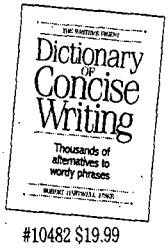

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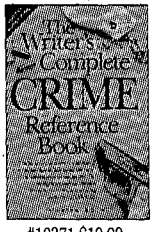

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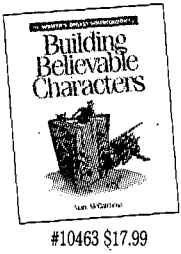

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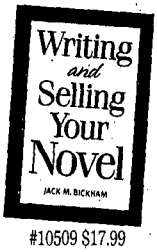

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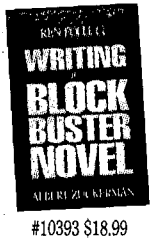

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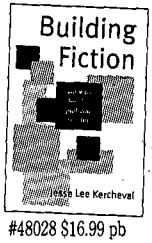

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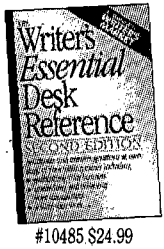

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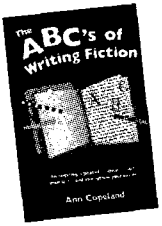

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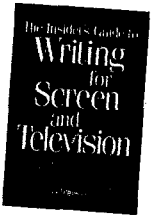

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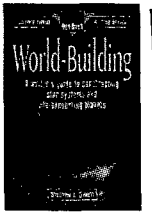

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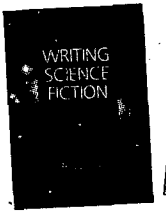

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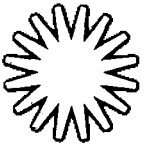

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

CRIMES OF MY YOUTH

Hear my confession, folks. A career of crime lies buried deep in my past, and I can't keep it concealed any longer. When I was a boy I committed dozens of murders for the sake of what I thought of as "science." My intensive research, as I thought of it then, added not one iota to the sum of human knowledge. It was all brutal folly and nothing more than that, and, thinking of it now, I feel covered with guilt over the loss of all those innocent lives. Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.

These lethal depredations of mine took place somewhere around 1945 or 1946. That is, I was ten or eleven years old, bristling with the sort of savagery that I suppose is universal in prepubescent boys. In my case, because I was a *bright* prepubescent boy who was expected by all to achieve wonderful things when he grew up, I could cloak my boyish savagery in an aura of serious purpose. My literary talents had not yet revealed themselves, back then. It was generally assumed, even by me, that I was ultimately going to be a scientist of some kind. And so, during those long-ago summers in the earliest years of the atomic era, what I did was kill a lot of hapless frogs. A *lot* of frogs, indeed.

Looking back now on the cheerfully cold-blooded boy I was then, I feel not only shock but disbelief. How could I have been so cruel? I will swat a mosquito today, under proper provocation, and I will spray poisonous vapors on the hordes of ants that invade our house every winter, and sometimes I will step on a garden snail who's munching on some horticultural rarity of mine, but otherwise I go out of my way not to take life, and I don't feel so good about the necessity of offing those mild-mannered ants and snails. (Mosquitoes are a different story.) Indeed, when it comes to my fellow creatures, I am today a veritable St. Francis of Assisi, at least so far as harming them with my own hands goes. I will carefully gather up spiders who intrude into the household on sheaves of paper and carry them gently outside; I scoop drowning salamanders and even wasps and hornets out of the swimming pool; I catch garden moles in tin cans and transport them to woodsy areas nearby, where I not only release them but hover around to defend them from stray cats until they have scurried out of sight.

There is a little inconsistency in my piety, I admit, where the issue of food comes in. Last night's swordfish steak was not synthetically grown in a test tube, nor the veal scaloppini of the night before. I have no illusions about that. I have made a treaty with myself whereby I allow other people to kill on my behalf, yea, even unto innocent lambs and calves, in order to provide me with food. I forgive myself that sin on the grounds that I was created an omnivore without being consulted about it, and thus I look upon meat as an important, even necessary, part of my diet. But if I had to hunt and butcher the animals I eat myself, I have no doubt at all that I'd be a vegetarian.

That's now, though. Let's look at *then*.

The ten-or-eleven-year-old me is quite different from the present-day item, and not simply because I didn't

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wear a beard in the mid-1940s. There's the matter of that sense of my destiny as a future scientist, something that vanished from me utterly as soon as I realized, somewhere around the age of thirteen, that I was obviously intended to be a writer. There was a component of hearty extroversion in me back then, too, that would disappear also in another few years. And, also, there was a certain blithe amorality about ten-year-old me that now strikes me as altogether alien. That little boy could easily have grown up to be the sort of white-coated villain who coolly hands placebos to dying children or practices vivisection on someone's pet cat or dog captured at dawn in the suburbs in order that some question of medical research can be answered. But something changed in me around the time I turned thirteen and I grew up to be the creator of the gentle, tormented telepath David Selig of *Dying Inside* and that reluctant warrior, the peace-loving Lord Valentine of *Lord Valentine's Castle.*

Here is the beady-eyed, ruthless little Robert Silverberg of fifty-plus years ago, though, stalking through the marshes of a muddy little lake in Ulster County, New York. A city-bred boy, turned loose every year for eight wondrous weeks in the relatively unspoiled world beyond the urban pavement. Watch him go at it:

Catching frogs with ruthless swoops of his unerring right hand. Killing them without a flicker of remorse by a process euphemistically known as *pithing,* which consisted of driving a spike through their little heads. Cutting them open, then, with deft strokes of a keen blade that would have been better employed for its intended purpose, which was carving model airplanes out of balsa wood. Peeling back the froggy integuments; staring with fascination at the tiny internal organs within. And then, I suppose, throwing them away, their purpose served.

But what purpose was that? I told myself, of course, that doing this thing to frogs was part of my scientific education. What was I learning, though? That frogs have curious little organs of various colors inside their soft little abdomens? One frog would have taught me that much. But I kept on catching and dissecting them, frog after frog, spending those carefree summer days marching around in the marshy part of the lake until I spied a small green nose above the water, and then pouncing, pithing, slicing, staring.

I was a skillful frog-hunter. I've always had terrific reflexes. Sometimes I'd put my cupped hand down against the muck and trap the poor frog before it had a chance even to jump; otherwise, I'd grab it in mid-air with a diabolical twist of the wrist as it tried to flee. What a wonderful achievement! Here's the frog, two inches long, minding his own business in the water. Here's the gigantic boy, a full four feet tall or even bigger, descending like the wrath of Jehovah. The deft hand descends. And seizes.

How did I get into this business of dissecting frogs? Why, I must have read about the importance of knowing what was inside frogs' bellies in one of the textbooks of biology that my obliging father, guiding me toward the future laboratory career that never was to be, provided for me. Or maybe there was an account of pithing technique in some issue of *Nature Magazine* or *Natural History,* both of which I read faithfully back then. I must have had some guidance of that sort, because I certainly knew not only the technique of pithing frogs but the term itself, which sticks in my vocabulary decades after my crimes themselves came to an end.

It would be nice to think that I actually learned something of a scientific nature by killing all those frogs. I still have one of those biology texts

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of long ago—*Biology and Human Welfare,* Peabody and Hunt, 1933—and on page 441 is a diagram of the internal organs of a frog. I hope that I consulted it as I worked, so that I did in fact discover that this thing here was the frog's liver, this the kidney, these the large intestines, this the bile sac. I might then have gone on to contemplate the functions of these tiny organs, their interrelationships, the ingenious design of them. I could have come away from these boyish exploits, then, not only with some awareness of the nature of metabolic processes in small amphibians, but also—what would have been much more valuable to the writer I would one day become—a sense of the well-nigh miraculous nature of life, of the astounding perfection of design that informs even the humblest of the universe's myriad creatures.

Did any of that cross my mind? Or did I, all the while pretending to be a scientist, simply get a kick out of catching frogs and cutting them open? I can't tell you that, not after more than half a century. I can only plead innocent boyish curiosity as my defense. I didn't know there was anything wrong with killing frogs, and it never occurred to me that frogs might have feelings too, and I really, *really* wanted to know what they looked like inside. That might excuse the first frog, or maybe even the next two or three. The human race has done many a horrible thing out of sheer curiosity, and some of those horrible things have led eventually to beneficial consequences. Dissecting the little girl next door would have been beyond the bounds of innocent boyish curiosity, but I think a frog or two could be deemed expendable, considering the restless, questing nature of the kid I was.

Nevertheless, I can't find any excuse for continuing to cut up frogs after my first few. Even the infamous Nazi surgeon Joseph Mengele proba-

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bly was actually learning something from the ghastly experiments on human beings that he conducted in the death camps, whereas I, once I had satisfied my curiosity about the shape and color of the internal organs of frogs, was learning nothing further about them, and should have stopped. But for the fact that Mengele was experimenting with human beings and I was simply fooling around with frogs—and frogs don't have, so far as we know, hopes and dreams and soaring visions—a case could be made out that I was doing something even more evil than he was. Mengele, at least, was carrying out real scientific investigation, however monstrous and loathsome. I was just cutting open frogs: pretending to be studying their internal anatomy, but actually merely killing for the pleasure of killing.

I suppose I figured that out, after a time, and gave up my nefarious frog-hunting ways forever in another summer or two. I know that by the time I entered my teens I had ceased all such stuff forever. My passionate interest in natural history remains with me—the one surviving vestige of my inquisitive boy-scientist youth—but when I spy some small creature today in woods or pond, I feel only pleasure at its beauty and efficiency of design, no yearning whatsoever to lay bare its internal organs.

If I were a biologist instead of a writer, I might feel otherwise. As readers of these columns are probably aware, I am no opponent of legitimate scientific research. Nor can I really condemn the eager, even ravenous, hunger for knowledge that led me to explore the innards of those frogs when I was ten or eleven. Better that, even at the expense of a few innocent little creatures' lives, than mere placid bovine passivity and glassy-eyed lack of interest in the world of natural phenomena. But oh, how I wish that I had stopped after the first two or three! O

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ON THE NET

James Patrick Kelly

EXPERIMENT

Fun with your new metaphor

Nobody asked us, but maybe we science fiction types should've had a say when it came to inventing netspeak. Surfing doesn't really cut it. Sure, it speaks to the fun you can have on-line, but surfing is a difficult skill to master. You think any dweeb with a 486 and a modem can head to Laguna, get like totally covered in some gnarly bowl and then grab the rail and lay back for the exit? No way, dude.

Al Gore's idea of cruising the info superhighway is wrong for different reasons. Although it implies the possibility—strike that, *probability*—that you will be stuck in traffic, it doesn't otherwise map all that well onto the net. You can't take Exit 22 off I-80, hang a left at the chromosome onto the Crab Nebula bypass so you can make it to Oz in time for your chess match with Tarzan.

Which isn't to say there is any one metaphor that will adequately describe how we access the Internet. The Net is too vast, diverse, and strange. And the browsers that take us to it are mutating faster than fruit flies.

But we readers of *Asimov's* have the language and ideas of science fiction to draw upon. The Internet is the very essence of SF: infinite possibilities bounded by robust technology.

So maybe we should experiment with some of our home-grown metaphors. Let's see, is going on-line a kind of interstellar travel? Well, not really. Telepathy? Nope. But if you look at it in a certain way, using the net *is* like teleporting.

Lock in your coordinates, dear reader. Energize!

Teleporting into a closet

The promise of teleportation is that you can go anywhere in an instant, as long as you know where you're going. You can beam into the Louvre after all the tourists leave. Ransack files at the Human Genome Project. Point the Hubble where you will. Or else materialize next door at the speed of thought, check out Frank's comic collection, read Janet's bad poetry, flip through Junior's baby pictures. And then there are those really friendly exhibitionists in Dubuque who would like to invite you to curl up on a king size bed with leather sheets while they. . . .

Okay, okay, so you don't physically go anywhere when you use the web. But some sites are so well done that they can envelope you, make you feel as if you've left your body behind. Just like a great story in this magazine can make you forget that you're in bed and it's 12:23 AM and your alarm is set for the butt crack of dawn.

At last count, there were thousands of way cool sites you can teleport . . . er . . . connect to. Unfortunately, there are a *gazillion* dumb, banal, useless and seriously out of control sites. And most sites, good and bad, are ephemeral. They move around. Their webmasters fall in love, get divorced, go out of business. Or maybe it's only that the server is down. All too often, just when you think you've found the perfect site, your screen will display an error message:

404 Not Found

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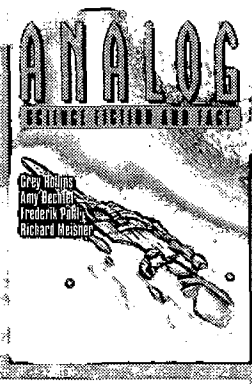

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which means you've teleported into an empty, locked closet.

But how do you find the grail site to begin with? Word-of-mouth is one way. Or you could peruse a column like this. Many sites have pages that can link you to dozens of related sites. But chances are good that at some point you'll have to start from scratch. Which brings us to the wonderful world of search engines.

Try this at home

Let's stipulate that, given the enormity of the Net, it's amazing that anyone can find anything at all. And yes, it's clear that search engines are getting better. Many use proprietary algorithms that try to guess what you're *really* after and then rank the sites they turn up. But all too often search engines will discover a hundred and sixty-eight sites of which only three are even remotely close to what you want. The fact is that even the best search engines are still god-awful.

But don't take my word for it. Here's a little experiment that you can try at home. The protocol is simple. Just type in the keyword *science fiction* on any search engine. Then teleport to the number one site and take a good, long look around. Compare and contrast among the top search engines. My own results follow, but remember, they are a snapshot of the web as it was in late January, 1998. By the time you read this, everything will be different.

HotBot (*www.hotbot.com*) is associated with the painfully hip and financially troubled **HotWired** (*www.hotwired.com*), which in turn is the cyber-avatar of *Wired* magazine. A bit of *Wired's* attitude has rubbed off on HotBot, most obviously in the in-your-face graphics. HotBot used to be my favorite search engine and I still use it regularly but I've bumped it down a notch because it can be slow, especially during business hours. For reasons that escape me, its number one hit was **Science Fiction Movie Posters on Line** (*www.jetstream.net/posters.html*). This is a tiny and graphically primitive site that is nevertheless fun if you're into nostalgia. Worth a quick look, but just that. It features six original movie posters from such golden oldies as *Godzilla, The Beast from Twenty Thousand Fathoms,* the over-rated *The Day the Earth Stood Still,* and the underrated *Forbidden Planet.* There is some forgettable commentary associated with the jpg images.

I use **Excite** (*www.excite.com*) as my browser's home page—not because I think it's the best search engine around, but because I can personalize the welcome page to report breaking news and those all-important late Celtic and Red Sox scores. Its top site was felicitous for readers of this magazine: a useful **Isaac Asimov Home Page** (*www.clark.net/pub/edseiler/WWW/asimov_home_page.html*) Author Edward Seiler has assembled "a comprehensive collection of resources" on the Good Doctor, the centerpiece of which is a splendid Asimov bibliography, indexed in a number of different ways. There is even a graph of his prodigious literary output over his entire career, from which we learn that, "It took nineteen years for Asimov to publish his first 100 books, ten years to publish the next 100, and only five years to bring the total up to 300." While not the prettiest site on the web, this is where *I* would start any research into the career of one of science fiction's greatest minds.

I'm not sure why I never warmed to **Lycos** (*www.lycos.com*), but although I have bookmarked it, I hardly ever use it. Lycos has a clean interface and some helpful shortcut links on its welcome page. It returns

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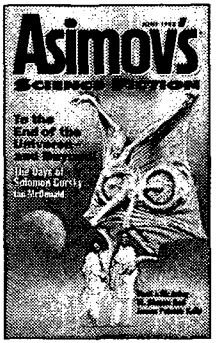

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hits just as quickly—or slowly—as the competition. Maybe the reason I avoid it is that its search results have such a low wheat-to-chaff ratio. Certainly its pick hit was among the least interesting of any in this experiment. **Science Fiction** *(www.cs.helsinki.fi/~okoskimi/SciFi/SciFi.html)* is a minor appendage of the personal webpage of Oskari Koskimies, a Finnish grad student in computer science. Science Fiction lists some of Mr. Koskimies's fave writers, like Douglas Adams, Isaac Asimov, Iain Banks, and fave movies, like *Stars War* and *Trek, Terminator,* and *Blade Runner*. Mr. Koskimies has tried his hand at writing and if you read Finnish (I don't), you could sample his wares. I feel a little queasy saying anything else about this site, since there is so very little to talk about.

A short sharp rant

I guess my problem is that, in general, I'm not all that interested in personal webpages that focus on the lives of their perpetrators. I suppose that if a friend put one up, I might teleport over for a visit—if she insisted. But nosing around the effects of some stranger, whether she lives in Finland or Poland or Portland, makes me feel like a voyeur. Of course, many personal pages are packed with content that has nothing to do with what the owner had for breakfast or what he watches on a slow Tuesday night. Now if you've got a magnificent obsession, say like Edward Seiler would seem to have for Isaac Asimov, then go ahead and share it with us. Hey, I've committed a personal webpage myself (see below) but I haven't hung the virtual walls with my diploma or pictures of my ferrets or the plan for my cutting garden for all the world to see.

At least not yet. . . .

Ancient History

Back when I first beamed onto the world wide web, I thought **AltaVista**

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(*www.altavista.digital.com*) was the best search engine around. I remember being astonished when it would report thousands of hits for each search. Of course, the site I wanted was inevitably on page eighteen of thirty, but none the less, I was impressed. One cool search feature that I believe AltaVista pioneered was its ability to search for all the sites that linked to another site, say for example, *yours* or *mine*. Just type *link:* followed by the URL you're interested in.

I was puzzled and disappointed that AltaVista's choice for the top science fiction site was a page in Yahoo dedicated to Cyberpunk MUDs, MOOs, and MUSHes. Now I've got nothing against MUDs, which are the mutant offspring of role-playing games and online chatrooms, nor against cyberpunk, which I helped beta test once upon a time, but this seems a pretty esoteric topic for anyone's top SF site. Besides, if I wanted to search another search engine, I'd go there directly.

Except **Yahoo** (*www.yahoo.com*) isn't quite like other search engines. While the competition uses software to canvass the Net, Yahoo relies on actual human beings to select the sites in its database. The Yahoos are reputed to be very selective. And it's organized as a directory, which means that you must navigate through multiple topic pages before you get to choose any sites. I fudged my protocol and clicked through the first choice on several consecutive Yahoo pages until I arrived at slick, media-oriented **Science Fiction Online** *(http://www.zdnet.com/yil/content/mag/9712/scifitoc.html)*, part of **Yahoo's Internet Life** *(www.zdnet.com/yil)* site. Science Fiction Online featured interviews with various starship captains and space station diplomats but its chief value would seem to be as a link site. I enjoyed the authors' breezy and often funny commentary on where they proposed to send me.

Many people swear by Yahoo; I'm not one of them. It's all well and good to be choosy about whom you invite to your party, but I find the crowd just a bit thin. If you can't find what you want on Yahoo, the Yahoos thoughtfully provide a button to continue your search on AltaVista.

Wait a minute, wasn't that where we came in?

Who's Number One?

While the search engines turned up a few cool places to visit, I doubt any are science fiction's grailsite. What is it, then? My opinion changes from week to week, but if you don't hold me to it, I'd say the honor goes to **SFF NET** *(www.sff.net)*. This is an enormous site, host to what looks to be several hundred writers' homepages. SFF NET also has news groups devoted to individual authors, in which the authors themselves participate. There are chat rooms and files to download, but of all the goodies here, the one I use most often is the famous *Locus Magazine's* Index 1984-1997, which lists the contents of all the books, anthologies, single-author collections and magazines that *Locus* has received. You want to check your favorite author's bibliography? This is the place. Be warned that SFF NET charges $8.95 a month for certain advanced services, but most of the good stuff is free.

Exit

So there you have it. This data will be months old by the time you read this, so feel free to conduct your own experiment. As the digerati are fond of saying, your mileage may vary.

Meanwhile, happy teleporting! ❍

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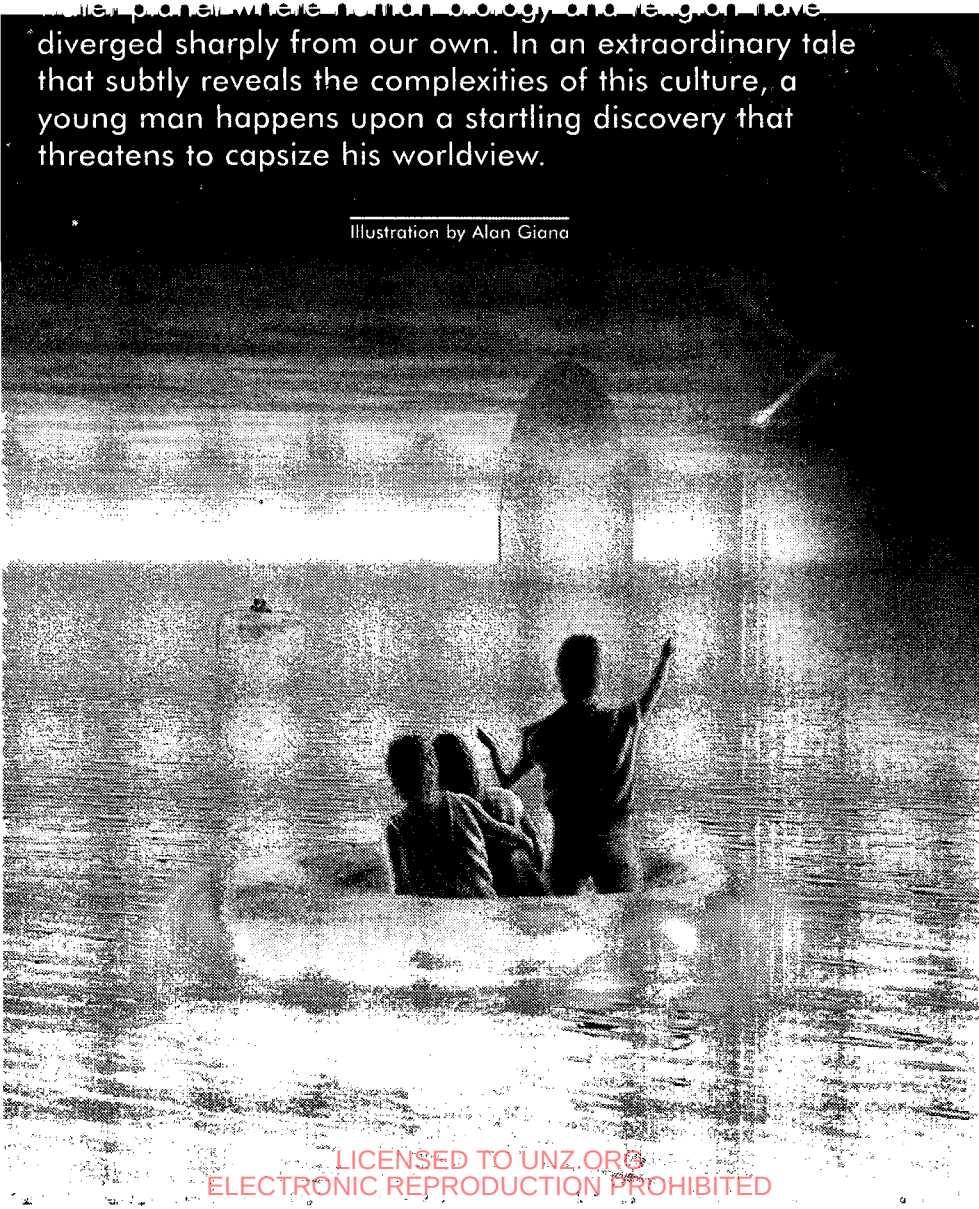

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1

The swell was gently lifting and lowering the boat. My breathing grew slower, falling into step with the creaking of the hull, until I could no longer tell the difference between the faint rhythmic motion of the cabin and the sensation of filling and emptying my lungs. It was like floating in darkness: every inhalation buoyed me up, slightly; every exhalation made me sink back down again.

In the bunk above me, my brother Daniel said distinctly, "Do you believe in God?"

My head was cleared of sleep in an instant, but I didn't reply straight away. I'd never closed my eyes, but the darkness of the unlit cabin seemed to shift in front of me, grains of phantom light moving like a cloud of disturbed insects.

"Martin?"

"I'm awake."

"Do you believe in God?"

"Of course." Everyone I knew believed in God. Everyone talked about Her, everyone prayed to Her. Daniel most of all. Since he'd joined the Deep Church the previous summer, he prayed every morning for a kilotau before dawn. I'd often wake to find myself aware of him kneeling by the far wall of the cabin, muttering and pounding his chest, before I drifted gratefully back to sleep.

Our family had always been Transitional, but Daniel was fifteen, old enough to choose for himself. My mother accepted this with diplomatic silence, but my father seemed positively proud of Daniel's independence and strength of conviction. My own feelings were mixed. I'd grown used to swimming in my older brother's wake, but I'd never resented it, because he'd always let me in on the view ahead: reading me passages from the books he read himself, teaching me words and phrases from the languages he studied, sketching some of the mathematics I was yet to encounter first-hand. We used to lie awake half the night, talking about the cores of stars or the hierarchy of transfinite numbers. But Daniel had told me nothing about the reasons for his conversion, and his ever-increasing piety. I didn't know whether to feel hurt by this exclusion, or simply grateful; I could see that being Transitional was like a pale imitation of being Deep Church, but I wasn't sure that this was such a bad thing if the wages of mediocrity included sleeping until sunrise.

Daniel said, "Why?"

I stared up at the underside of his bunk, unsure whether I was really seeing it or just imagining its solidity against the cabin's ordinary darkness. "Someone must have guided the Angels here from Earth. If Earth's too far away to see from Covenant . . . how could anyone find Covenant from Earth, without God's help?"

I heard Daniel shift slightly. "Maybe the Angels had better telescopes than us. Or maybe they spread out from Earth in all directions, launching thousands of expeditions without even knowing what they'd find."

I laughed. "But they had to come *here,* to be made flesh again!" Even a less-than-devout ten-year-old knew that much. God prepared Covenant as the place for the Angels to repent their theft of immortality. The Transitionals believed that in a million years we could earn the right to be Angels again; the Deep Church believed that we'd remain flesh until the stars fell from the sky.

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Daniel said, "What makes you so sure that there were ever really Angels? Or that God really sent them Her daughter, Beatrice, to lead them back into the flesh?"

I pondered this for a while. The only answers I could think of came straight out of the Scriptures, and Daniel had taught me years ago that appeals to authority counted for nothing. Finally, I had to confess: "I don't know." I felt foolish, but I was grateful that he was willing to discuss these difficult questions with me. I wanted to believe in God for the right reasons, not just because everyone around me did.

He said, "Archaeologists have shown that we must have arrived about twenty thousand years ago. Before that, there's no evidence of humans, or any co-ecological plants and animals. That makes the Crossing older than the Scriptures say, but there are some dates that are open to interpretation, and with a bit of poetic license everything can be made to add up. And most biologists think the native microfauna could have formed by itself over millions of years, starting from simple chemicals, but that doesn't mean God didn't guide the whole process. Everything's compatible, really. Science and the Scriptures can both be true."

I thought I knew where he was headed, now. "So you've worked out a way to use science to prove that God exists?" I felt a surge of pride; my brother was a genius!

"No." Daniel was silent for a moment. "The thing is, it works both ways. Whatever's written in the Scriptures, people can always come up with different explanations for the facts. The ships might have left Earth for some other reason. The Angels might have made bodies for themselves for some other reason. There's no way to convince a non-believer that the Scriptures are the word of God. It's all a matter of faith."

"Oh."

"Faith's the most important thing," Daniel insisted. "If you don't have faith, you can be tempted into believing anything at all."

I made a noise of assent, trying not to sound too disappointed. I'd expected more from Daniel than the kind of bland assertions that sent me dozing off during sermons at the Transitional church.

"Do you know what you have to do to get faith?"

"No."

"Ask for it. That's all. Ask Beatrice to come into your heart and grant you the gift of faith."

I protested, "We do that every time we go to church!" I couldn't believe he'd forgotten the Transitional service already. After the priest placed a drop of seawater on our tongues, to symbolize the blood of Beatrice, we asked for the gifts of faith, hope, and love.

"But have you received it?"

I'd never thought about that. "I'm not sure." I believed in God, didn't I? "I might have."

Daniel was amused. "If you had the gift of faith, you'd *know*."

I gazed up into the darkness, troubled. "Do you have to go to the Deep Church, to ask for it properly?"

"No. Even in the Deep Church, not everyone has invited Beatrice into their hearts. You have to do it the way it says in the Scriptures: 'like an unborn child again, naked and helpless.'"

"I was Immersed, wasn't I?"

"In a metal bowl, when you were thirty days old. Infant Immersion is a ges-

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ture by the parents, an affirmation of their own good intentions. But it's not enough to save the child."

I was feeling very disoriented now. My father, at least, approved of Daniel's conversion . . . but now Daniel was trying to tell me that our family's transactions with God had all been grossly deficient, if not actually counterfeit.

Daniel said, "Remember what Beatrice told Her followers, the last time She appeared? 'Unless you are willing to drown in My blood, you will never look upon the face of My Mother.' So they bound each other hand and foot, and weighted themselves down with rocks."

My chest tightened. "And you've done that?"

"Yes."

"*When?*"

"Almost a year ago."

I was more confused than ever. "Did Ma and Fa go?"

Daniel laughed. "No! It's not a public ceremony. Some friends of mine from the Prayer Group helped; someone has to be on deck to haul you up, because it would be arrogant to expect Beatrice to break your bonds and raise you to the surface, like She did with Her followers. But in the water, you're alone with God."

He climbed down from his bunk and crouched by the side of my bed. "Are you ready to give your life to Beatrice, Martin?" His voice sent gray sparks flowing through the darkness.

I hesitated. "What if I just dive in? And stay under for a while?" I'd been swimming off the boat at night plenty of times, there was nothing to fear from that.

"No. You have to be weighted down." His tone made it clear that there could be no compromise on this. "How long can you hold your breath?"

"Two hundred tau." That was an exaggeration; two hundred was what I was aiming for.

"That's long enough."

I didn't reply. Daniel said, "I'll pray with you."

I climbed out of bed, and we knelt together. Daniel murmured, "Please, Holy Beatrice, grant my brother Martin the courage to accept the precious gift of Your blood." Then he started praying in what I took to be a foreign language, uttering a rapid stream of harsh syllables unlike anything I'd heard before. I listened apprehensively; I wasn't sure that I wanted Beatrice to change my mind, and I was afraid that this display of fervor might actually persuade Her.

I said, "What if I don't do it?"

"Then you'll never see the face of God."

I knew what that meant: I'd wander alone in the belly of Death, in darkness, for eternity. And even if the Scriptures weren't meant to be taken literally on this, the reality behind the metaphor could only be worse. Indescribably worse.

"But . . . what about Ma and Fa?" I was more worried about them, because I knew they'd never climb weighted off the side of the boat at Daniel's behest.

"That will take time," he said softly.

My mind reeled. He was absolutely serious.

I heard him stand and walk over to the ladder. He climbed a few rungs and opened the hatch. Enough starlight came in to give shape to his arms and shoulders, but as he turned to me I still couldn't make out his face. "Come on, Martin!" he whispered. "The longer you put it off, the harder it gets." The

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hushed urgency of his voice was familiar: generous and conspiratorial, nothing like an adult's impatience. He might almost have been daring me to join him in a midnight raid on the pantry—not because he really needed a collaborator, but because he honestly didn't want me to miss out on the excitement, or the spoils.

I suppose I was more afraid of damnation than drowning, and I'd always trusted Daniel to warn me of the dangers ahead. But this time I wasn't entirely convinced that he was right, so I must have been driven by something more than fear, and blind trust.

Maybe it came down to the fact that he was offering to make me his equal in this. I was ten years old, and I ached to become something more than I was; to reach, not my parents' burdensome adulthood, but the halfway point, full of freedom and secrets, that Daniel had reached. I wanted to be as strong, as fast, as quick-witted and widely read as he was. Becoming as certain of God would not have been my first choice, but there wasn't much point hoping for divine intervention to grant me anything else.

I followed him up onto the deck.

He took cord, and a knife, and four spare weights of the kind we used on our nets from the toolbox. He threaded the weights onto the cord, then I took off my shorts and sat naked on the deck while he knotted a figure-eight around my ankles. I raised my feet experimentally; the weights didn't seem all that heavy. But in the water, I knew, they'd be more than enough to counteract my body's slight buoyancy.

"Martin? Hold out your hands."

Suddenly I was crying. With my arms free, at least I could swim against the tug of the weights. But if my hands were tied, I'd be helpless.

Daniel crouched down and met my eyes. "Ssh. It's all right."

I hated myself. I could feel my face contorted into the mask of a blubbering infant.

"Are you afraid?"

I nodded.

Daniel smiled reassuringly. "You know why? You know who's doing that? Death doesn't want Beatrice to have you. He wants you for himself. So he's here on this boat, putting fear into your heart, because he *knows* he's almost lost you."

I saw something move in the shadows behind the toolbox, something slithering into the darkness. If we went back down to the cabin now, would Death follow us? To wait for Daniel to fall asleep? If I'd turned my back on Beatrice, who could I ask to send Death away?

I stared at the deck, tears of shame dripping from my cheeks. I held out my arms, wrists together.

When my hands were tied—not palm-to-palm as I'd expected, but in separate loops joined by a short bridge—Daniel unwound a long stretch of rope from the winch at the rear of the boat, and coiled it on the deck. I didn't want to think about how long it was, but I knew I'd never dived to that depth. He took the blunt hook at the end of the rope, slipped it over my arms, then screwed it closed to form an unbroken ring. Then he checked again that the cord around my wrists was neither so tight as to burn me, nor so loose as to let me slip. As he did this, I saw something creep over his face: some kind of doubt or fear of his own. He said, "Hang onto the hook. Just in case. Don't let go, no matter what. Okay?" He whispered something to Beatrice, then looked up at me, confident again.

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He helped me to stand and shuffle over to the guard rail, just to one side of the winch. Then he picked me up under the arms and lifted me over, resting my feet on the outer hull. The deck was inert, a mineralized endoshell, but behind the guard rails the hull was palpably alive: slick with protective secretions, glowing softly. My toes curled uselessly against the lubricated skin; I had no purchase at all. The hull was supporting some of my weight, but Daniel's arms would tire eventually. If I wanted to back out, I'd have to do it quickly.

A warm breeze was blowing. I looked around, at the flat horizon, at the blaze of stars, at the faint silver light off the water. Daniel recited: "Holy Beatrice, I am ready to die to this world. Let me drown in Your blood, that I might be redeemed, and look upon the face of Your Mother."

I repeated the words, trying hard to mean them.

"Holy Beatrice, I offer You my life. All I do now, I do for You. Come into my heart, and grant me the gift of faith. Come into my heart, and grant me the gift of hope. Come into my heart, and grant me the gift of love."

"And grant me the gift of love."

Daniel released me. At first, my feet seemed to adhere magically to the hull, and I pivoted backward without actually falling. I clung tightly to the hook, pressing the cold metal against my belly, and willed the rope of the winch to snap taut, leaving me dangling in midair. I even braced myself for the shock. Some part of me really did believe that I could change my mind, even now.

Then my feet slipped and I plunged into the ocean and sank straight down.

It was not like a dive—not even a dive from an untried height, when it took so long for the water to bring you to a halt that it began to grow frightening. I was falling through the water ever faster, as if it was air. The vision I'd had of the rope keeping me above the water now swung to the opposite extreme: my acceleration seemed to prove that the coil on the deck was attached to nothing, that its frayed end was already beneath the surface. *That's what the followers had done, wasn't it? They'd let themselves be thrown in without a lifeline.* So Daniel had cut the rope, and I was on my way to the bottom of the ocean.

Then the hook jerked my hands up over my head, jarring my wrists and shoulders, and I was motionless.

I turned my face toward the surface, but neither starlight nor the hull's faint phosphorescence reached this deep. I let a stream of bubbles escape from my mouth; I felt them slide over my upper lip, but no trace of them registered in the darkness.

I shifted my hands warily over the hook. I could still feel the cord fast around my wrists, but Daniel had warned me not to trust it. I brought my knees up to my chest, gauging the effect of the weights. If the cord broke, at least my hands would be free, but even so I wasn't sure I'd be able to ascend. The thought of trying to unpick the knots around my ankles as I tumbled deeper filled me with horror.

My shoulders ached, but I wasn't injured. It didn't take much effort to pull myself up until my chin was level with the bottom of the hook. Going further was awkward—with my hands so close together I couldn't brace myself properly—but on the third attempt I managed to get my arms locked, pointing straight down.

I'd done this without any real plan, but then it struck me that even with my hands and feet tied, I could try shinning up the rope. It was just a matter

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of getting started. I'd have to turn upside-down, grab the rope between my knees, then curl up—dragging the hook—and get a grip with my hands at a higher point.

And if I couldn't reach up far enough to right myself?

I'd ascend feet-first.

I couldn't even manage the first step. I thought it would be as simple as keeping my arms rigid and letting myself topple backward, but in the water even two-thirds of my body wasn't sufficient to counterbalance the weights.

I tried a different approach: I dropped down to hang at arm's length, raised my legs as high as I could, then proceeded to pull myself up again. But my grip wasn't tight enough to resist the turning force of the weights; I just pivoted around my center of gravity—which was somewhere near my knees—and ended up, still bent double, but almost horizontal.

I eased myself down again, and tried threading my feet through the circle of my arms. I didn't succeed on the first attempt, and then on reflection it seemed like a bad move anyway. Even if I managed to grip the rope between my bound feet—rather than just tumbling over backward, out of control, and dislocating my shoulders—climbing the rope *upside-down with my hands behind my back* would either be impossible, or so awkward and strenuous that I'd run out of oxygen before I got a tenth of the way.

I let some more air escape from my lungs. I could feel the muscles in my diaphragm reproaching me for keeping them from doing what they wanted to do; not urgently yet, but the knowledge that I had no control over when I'd be able to draw breath again made it harder to stay calm. I knew I could rely on Daniel to bring me to the surface on the count of two hundred. But I'd only ever stayed down for a hundred and sixty. Forty more tau would be an eternity.

I'd almost forgotten what the whole ordeal was meant to be about, but now I started praying. *Please Holy Beatrice, don't let me die. I know You drowned like this to save me, but if I die it won't help anyone. Daniel would end up in the deepest shit . . . but that's not a threat, it's just an observation.* I felt a stab of anxiety; on top of everything else, had I just offended the Daughter of God? I struggled on, my confidence waning. *I don't want to die. But You already know that. So I don't know what You want me to say.*

I released some more stale air, wishing I'd counted the time I'd been under; you weren't supposed to empty your lungs too quickly—when they were deflated it was even harder not to take a breath—but holding all the carbon dioxide in too long wasn't good either.

Praying only seemed to make me more desperate, so I tried to think other kinds of holy thoughts. I couldn't remember anything from the Scriptures word for word, but the gist of the most important part started running through my mind.

After living in Her body for thirty years, and persuading all the Angels to become mortal again, Beatrice had gone back up to their deserted spaceship and flown it straight into the ocean. When Death saw Her coming, he took the form of a giant serpent, coiled in the water, waiting. And even though She was the Daughter of God, with the power to do anything, She let Death swallow Her.

That's how much She loved us.

Death thought he'd won everything. Beatrice was trapped inside him, in the darkness, alone. The Angels were flesh again, so he wouldn't even have to wait for the stars to fall before he claimed them.

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But Beatrice was part of God. Death had swallowed part of God. This was a mistake. After three days, his jaws burst open and Beatrice came flying out, wreathed in fire. Death was broken, shriveled, diminished.

My limbs were numb but my chest was burning. Death was still strong enough to hold down the damned. I started thrashing about blindly, wasting whatever oxygen was left in my blood, but desperate to distract myself from the urge to inhale.

Please Holy Beatrice—

Please Daniel—

Luminous bruises blossomed behind my eyes and drifted out into the water. I watched them curling into a kind of vortex, as if something was drawing them in.

It was the mouth of the serpent, swallowing my soul. I opened my own mouth and made a wretched noise, and Death swam forward to kiss me, to breathe cold water into my lungs.

Suddenly, everything was seared with light. The serpent turned and fled, like a pale timid worm. A wave of contentment washed over me, as if I was an infant again and my mother had wrapped her arms around me tightly. It was like basking in sunlight, listening to laughter, dreaming of music too beautiful to be real. Every muscle in my body was still trying to prize my lungs open to the water, but now I found myself fighting this almost absentmindedly while I marveled at my strange euphoria.

Cold air swept over my hands and down my arms. I raised myself up to take a mouthful, then slumped down again, giddy and spluttering, grateful for every breath but still elated by something else entirely. The light that had filled my eyes was gone, but it left a violet afterimage everywhere I looked. Daniel kept winding until my head was level with the guard rail, then he clamped the winch, bent down, and threw me over his shoulder.

I'd been warm enough in the water, but now my teeth were chattering. Daniel wrapped a towel around me, then set to work cutting the cord. I beamed at him. "I'm so happy!" He gestured to me to be quieter, but then he whispered joyfully, "That's the love of Beatrice. She'll always be with you now, Martin."

I blinked with surprise, then laughed softly at my own stupidity. Until that moment, I hadn't connected what had happened with Beatrice at all. But of course it was Her. I'd asked Her to come into my heart, and She had.

And I could see it in Daniel's face: a year after his own Drowning, he still felt Her presence.

He said, "Everything you do now is for Beatrice. When you look through your telescope, you'll do it to honor Her creation. When you eat, or drink, or swim, you'll do it to give thanks for Her gifts." I nodded enthusiastically.

Daniel tidied everything away, even soaking up the puddles of water I'd left on the deck. Back in the cabin, he recited from the Scriptures, passages that I'd never really understood before, but which now all seemed to be about the Drowning, and the way I was feeling. It was as if I'd opened the book and found myself mentioned by name on every page.

When Daniel fell asleep before me, for the first time in my life I didn't feel the slightest pang of loneliness. The Daughter of God was with me: I could feel Her presence, like a flame inside my skull, radiating warmth through the darkness behind my eyes.

Giving me comfort, giving me strength.

Giving me faith.

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2

The monastery was almost four milliradians northeast of our home grounds. Daniel and I took the launch to a rendezvous point, and met up with three other small vessels before continuing. It had been the same routine every tenth night for almost a year—and Daniel had been going to the Prayer Group himself for a year before that—so the launch didn't need much supervision. Feeding on nutrients in the ocean, propelling itself by pumping water through fine channels in its skin, guided by both sunlight and Covenant's magnetic field, it was a perfect example of the kind of legacy of the Angels that technology would never be able to match.

Bartholomew, Rachel, and Agnes were in one launch, and they traveled beside us while the others skimmed ahead. Bartholomew and Rachel were married, though they were only seventeen, scarcely older than Daniel. Agnes, Rachel's sister, was sixteen. Because I was the youngest member of the Prayer Group, Agnes had fussed over me from the day I'd joined. She said, "It's your big night tonight, Martin, isn't it?" I nodded, but declined to pursue the conversation, leaving her free to talk to Daniel.

It was dusk by the time the monastery came into sight, a conical tower built from at least ten thousand hulls, rising up from the water in the stylized form of Beatrice's spaceship. Aimed at the sky, not down into the depths. Though some commentators on the Scriptures insisted that the spaceship itself had sunk forever, and Beatrice had risen from the water unaided, it was still the definitive symbol of Her victory over Death. For the three days of Her separation from God, all such buildings stood in darkness, but that was half a year away, and now the monastery shone from every porthole.

There was a narrow tunnel leading into the base of the tower; the launches detected its scent in the water and filed in one by one. I knew they didn't have souls, but I wondered what it would have been like for them if they'd been aware of their actions. Normally they rested in the dock of a single hull, a pouch of boatskin that secured them but still left them largely exposed. Maybe being drawn instinctively into this vast structure would have felt even safer, even more comforting, than docking with their home boat. When I said something to this effect, Rachel, in the launch behind me, sniggered. Agnes said, "Don't be horrible."

The walls of the tunnel phosphoresced pale green, but the opening ahead was filled with white lamplight, dazzlingly richer and brighter. We emerged into a canal circling a vast atrium, and continued around it until the launches found empty docks.

As we disembarked, every footstep, every splash, echoed back at us. I looked up at the ceiling, a dome spliced together from hundreds of curved triangular hull sections, tattooed with scenes from the Scriptures. The original illustrations were more than a thousand years old, but the living boatskin degraded the pigments on a time scale of decades, so the monks had to constantly renew them.

"Beatrice Joining the Angels" was my favorite. Because the Angels weren't flesh, they didn't grow inside their mothers; they just appeared from nowhere in the streets of the Immaterial Cities. In the picture on the ceiling, Beatrice's immaterial body was half-formed, with cherubs still working to clothe the immaterial bones of Her legs and arms in immaterial muscles, veins, and skin. A few Angels in luminous robes were glancing sideways at

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Her, but you could tell they weren't particularly impressed. They'd had no way of knowing, then, who She was.

A corridor with its own smaller illustrations led from the atrium to the meeting room. There were about fifty people in the Prayer Group—including several priests and monks, though they acted just like everyone else. In church, you followed the liturgy; the priest slotted-in his or her sermon, but there was no room for the worshippers to do much more than pray or sing in unison and offer rote responses. Here it was much less formal. There were two or three different speakers every night—sometimes guests who were visiting the monastery, sometimes members of the group—and after that anyone could ask the group to pray with them, about whatever they liked.

I'd fallen behind the others, but they'd saved me an aisle seat. Agnes was to my left, then Daniel, Bartholomew and Rachel. Agnes said, "Are you nervous?"

"No."

Daniel laughed, as if this claim was ridiculous.

I said, "I'm not." I'd meant to sound loftily unperturbed, but the words came out sullen and childish.

The first two speakers were both lay theologians, Firmlanders who were visiting the monastery. One gave a talk about people who belonged to false religions, and how they were all—in effect—worshipping Beatrice, but just didn't know it. He said they wouldn't be damned, because they'd had no choice about the cultures they were born into. Beatrice would know they'd meant well, and forgive them.

I wanted this to be true, but it made no sense to me. Either Beatrice *was* the Daughter of God, and everyone who thought otherwise had turned away from Her into the darkness, or . . . there was no "or." I only had to close my eyes and feel Her presence to know that. Still, everyone applauded when the man finished, and all the questions people asked seemed sympathetic to his views, so perhaps his arguments had simply been too subtle for me to follow.

The second speaker referred to Beatrice as "the Holy Jester," and rebuked us severely for not paying enough attention to Her sense of humor. She cited events in the Scriptures which she said were practical jokes, and then went on at some length about "the healing power of laughter." It was all about as gripping as a lecture on nutrition and hygiene; I struggled to keep my eyes open. At the end, no one could think of any questions.

Then Carol, who was running the meeting, said, "Now Martin is going to give witness to the power of Beatrice in his life."

Everyone applauded encouragingly. As I rose to my feet and stepped into the aisle, Daniel leaned toward Agnes and whispered sarcastically, "This should be good."

I stood at the lectern and gave the talk I'd been rehearsing for days. Beatrice, I said, was beside me now whatever I did: whether I studied or worked, ate or swam, or just sat and watched the stars. When I woke in the morning and looked into my heart, She was there without fail, offering me strength and guidance. When I lay in bed at night, I feared nothing, because I knew She was watching over me. Before my Drowning, I'd been unsure of my faith, but now I'd never again be able to doubt that the Daughter of God had become flesh, and died, and conquered Death, because of Her great love for us.

It was all true, but even as I said these things I couldn't get Daniel's sarcastic words out of my mind. I glanced over at the row where I'd been sitting, at the people I'd traveled with. What did I have in common with them, really?

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Rachel and Bartholomew were married. Bartholomew and Daniel had studied together, and still played on the same dive-ball team. Daniel and Agnes were probably in love. And Daniel was my brother . . . but the only difference that seemed to make was the fact that he could belittle me far more efficiently than any stranger.

In the open prayer that followed, I paid no attention to the problems and blessings people were sharing with the group. I tried silently calling on Beatrice to dissolve the knot of anger in my heart. But I couldn't do it; I'd turned too far away from Her.

When the meeting was over, and people started moving into the adjoining room to talk for a while, I hung back. When the others were out of sight, I ducked into the corridor, and headed straight for the launch.

Daniel could get a ride home with his friends; it wasn't far out of their way. I'd wait a short distance from the boat until he caught up; if my parents saw me arrive on my own I'd be in trouble. Daniel would be angry, of course, but he wouldn't betray me.

Once I'd freed the launch from its dock, it knew exactly where to go: around the canal, back to the tunnel, out into the open sea. As I sped across the calm, dark water, I felt the presence of Beatrice returning, which seemed like a sign that She understood that I'd had to get away.

I leaned over and dipped my hand in the water, feeling the current the launch was generating by shuffling ions in and out of the cells of its skin. The outer hull glowed a phosphorescent blue, more to warn other vessels than to light the way. In the time of Beatrice, one of her followers had sat in the Immaterial City and designed this creature from scratch. It gave me a kind of vertigo, just imagining the things the Angels had known. I wasn't sure why so much of it had been lost, but I wanted to rediscover it all. Even the Deep Church taught that there was nothing wrong with that, so long as we didn't use it to try to become immortal again.

The monastery shrank to a blur of light on the horizon, and there was no other beacon visible on the water, but I could read the stars, and sense the field lines, so I knew the launch was heading in the right direction.

When I noticed a blue speck in the distance, it was clear that it wasn't Daniel and the others chasing after me; it was coming from the wrong direction. As I watched the launch drawing nearer I grew anxious; if this was someone I knew, and I couldn't come up with a good reason to be traveling alone, word would get back to my parents.

Before I could make out anyone on board, a voice shouted, "Can you help me? I'm lost!"

I thought for a while before replying. The voice sounded almost matter-of-fact, making light of this blunt admission of helplessness, but it was no joke. If you were sick, your diurnal sense and your field sense could both become scrambled, making the stars much harder to read. It had happened to me a couple of times, and it had been a horrible experience—even standing safely on the deck of our boat. This late at night, a launch with only its field sense to guide it could lose track of its position, especially if you were trying to take it somewhere it hadn't been before.

I shouted back our coordinates, and the time. I was fairly confident that I had them down to the nearest hundred microradians, and few hundred tau.

"That can't be right! Can I approach? Let our launches talk?"

I hesitated. It had been drummed into me for as long as I could remember that if I ever found myself alone on the water, I should give other vessels a

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wide berth unless I knew the people on board. But Beatrice was with me, and if someone needed help it was wrong to refuse them.

"All right!" I stopped dead, and waited for the stranger to close the gap. As the launch drew up beside me, I was surprised to see that the passenger was a young man. He looked about Bartholomew's age, but he'd sounded much older.

We didn't need to tell the launches what to do; proximity was enough to trigger a chemical exchange of information. The man said, "Out on your own?"

"I'm traveling with my brother and his friends. I just went ahead a bit."

That made him smile. "Sent you on your way, did they? What do you think they're getting up to, back there?" I didn't reply; that was no way to talk about people you didn't even know. The man scanned the horizon, then spread his arms in a gesture of sympathy. "You must be feeling left out."

I shook my head. There was a pair of binoculars on the floor behind him; even before he'd called out for help, he could have seen that I was alone.

He jumped deftly between the launches, landing on the stern bench. I said, "There's nothing to steal." My skin was crawling, more with disbelief than fear. He was standing on the bench in the starlight, pulling a knife from his belt. The details—the pattern carved into the handle, the serrated edge of the blade—only made it seem more like a dream.

He coughed, suddenly nervous. "Just do what I tell you, and you won't get hurt."

I filled my lungs and shouted for help with all the strength I had; I knew there was no one in earshot, but I thought it might still frighten him off. He looked around, more startled than angry, as if he couldn't quite believe I'd waste so much effort. I jumped backward, into the water. A moment later I heard him follow me.

I found the blue glow of the launches above me, then swam hard, down and away from them, without wasting time searching for his shadow. Blood was pounding in my ears, but I knew I was moving almost silently; however fast he was, in the darkness he could swim right past me without knowing it. If he didn't catch me soon he'd probably return to the launch and wait to spot me when I came up for air. I had to surface far enough away to be invisible—even with the binoculars.

I was terrified that I'd feel a hand close around my ankle at any moment, but Beatrice was with me. As I swam, I thought back to my Drowning, and Her presence grew stronger than ever. When my lungs were almost bursting, She helped me to keep going, my limbs moving mechanically, blotches of light floating in front of my eyes. When I finally knew I had to surface, I turned face-up and ascended slowly, then lay on my back with only my mouth and nose above the water, refusing the temptation to stick my head up and look around.

I filled and emptied my lungs a few times, then dived again.

The fifth time I surfaced, I dared to look back. I couldn't see either launch. I raised myself higher, then turned a full circle in case I'd grown disoriented, but nothing came into sight.

I checked the stars, and my field sense. The launches should *not* have been over the horizon. I trod water, riding the swell, and tried not to think about how tired I was. It was at least two milliradians to the nearest boat. Good swimmers—some younger than I was—competed in marathons over distances like that, but I'd never even aspired to such feats of endurance. Unprepared, in the middle of the night, I knew I wouldn't make it.

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If the man had given up on me, would he have taken our launch? When they cost so little, and the markings were so hard to change? That would be nothing but an admission of guilt. *So why couldn't I see it?* Either he'd sent it on its way, or it had decided to return home itself.

I knew the path it would have taken; I would have seen it go by, if I'd been looking for it when I'd surfaced before. But I had no hope of catching it now.

I began to pray. I knew I'd been wrong to leave the others, but I asked for forgiveness, and felt it being granted. I watched the horizon almost calmly—smiling at the blue flashes of meteors burning up high above the ocean—certain that Beatrice would not abandon me.

I was still praying—treading water, shivering from the cool of the air—when a blue light appeared in the distance. It disappeared as the swell took me down again, but there was no mistaking it for a shooting star. *Was this Daniel and the others—or the stranger?* I didn't have long to decide; if I wanted to get within earshot as they passed, I'd have to swim hard.

I closed my eyes and prayed for guidance. *Please Holy Beatrice, let me know.* Joy flooded through my mind, instantly: it was them, I was certain of it. I set off as fast as I could.

I started yelling before I could see how many passengers there were, but I knew Beatrice would never allow me to be mistaken. A flare shot up from the launch, revealing four figures standing side by side, scanning the water. I shouted with jubilation, and waved my arms. Someone finally spotted me, and they brought the launch around toward me. By the time I was on board I was so charged up on adrenaline and relief that I almost believed I could have dived back into the water and raced them home.

I thought Daniel would be angry, but when I described what had happened all he said was, "We'd better get moving."

Agnes embraced me. Bartholomew gave me an almost respectful look, but Rachel muttered sourly, "You're an idiot, Martin. You don't know how lucky you are."

I said, "I know."

Our parents were standing on deck. The empty launch had arrived some time ago; they'd been about to set out to look for us. When the others had departed I began recounting everything again, this time trying to play down any element of danger.

Before I'd finished, my mother grabbed Daniel by the front of his shirt and started slapping him. "I trusted you with him! *You maniac!* I trusted you!" Daniel half raised his arm to block her, but then let it drop and just turned his face to the deck.

I burst into tears. "It was my fault!" Our parents never struck us; I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

My father said soothingly, "Look . . . he's home now. He's safe. No one touched him." He put an arm around my shoulders and asked warily, "That's right, Martin, isn't it?"

I nodded tearfully. This was worse than anything that had happened on the launch, or in the water; I felt a thousand times more helpless, a thousand times more like a child.

I said, "Beatrice was watching over me."

My mother rolled her eyes and laughed wildly, letting go of Daniel's shirt. "Beatrice? *Beatrice?* Don't you know what could have happened to you? You're too young to have given him what he wanted. He would have had to use the knife."

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The chill of my wet clothes seemed to penetrate deeper. I swayed unsteadily, but fought to stay upright. Then I whispered stubbornly, "Beatrice was there."

My father said, "Go and get changed, or you're going to freeze to death."

I lay in bed listening to them shout at Daniel. When he finally came down the ladder I was so sick with shame that I wished I'd drowned.

He said, "Are you all right?"

There was nothing I could say. I couldn't ask him to forgive me.

"Martin?" Daniel turned on the lamp. His face was streaked with tears; he laughed softly, wiping them away. "Fuck, you had me worried. Don't ever do anything like that again."

"I won't."

"Okay." That was it; no shouting, no recriminations. "Do you want to pray with me?"

We knelt side by side, praying for our parents to be at peace, praying for the man who'd tried to hurt me. I started trembling; everything was catching up with me. Suddenly, words began gushing from my mouth—words I neither recognized nor understood, though I knew I was praying for everything to be all right with Daniel, praying that our parents would stop blaming him for my stupidity.

The strange words kept flowing out of me, an incomprehensible torrent somehow imbued with everything I was feeling. I knew what was happening: *Beatrice had given me the Angels' tongue.* We'd had to surrender all knowledge of it when we became flesh, but sometimes She granted people the ability to pray this way, because the language of the Angels could express things we could no longer put into words. Daniel had been able to do it ever since his Drowning, but it wasn't something you could teach, or even something you could ask for.

When I finally stopped, my mind was racing. "Maybe Beatrice planned everything that happened tonight? Maybe She arranged it all, to lead up to this moment!"

Daniel shook his head, wincing slightly. "Don't get carried away. You have the gift; just accept it." He nudged me with his shoulder. "Now get into bed, before we're both in more trouble."

I lay awake almost until dawn, overwhelmed with happiness. Daniel had forgiven me. Beatrice had protected and blessed me. I felt no more shame, just humility and amazement. I knew I'd done nothing to deserve it, but my life was wrapped in the love of God.

3

According to the Scriptures, the oceans of Earth were storm-tossed, and filled with dangerous creatures. But on Covenant, the oceans were calm, and the Angels created nothing in the ecopoiesis that would harm their own mortal incarnations. The four continents and the four oceans were rendered equally hospitable, and just as women and men were made indistinguishable in the sight of God, so were Freelanders and Firmlanders. (Some commentators insisted that this was literally true: God chose to blind Herself to where we lived, and whether or not we'd been born with a penis. I thought that was a beautiful idea, even if I couldn't quite grasp the logistics of it.)

I'd heard that certain obscure sects taught that half the Angels had actu-

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ally become embodied as a separate people who could live in the water and breathe beneath the surface, but then God destroyed them because they were a mockery of Beatrice's death. No legitimate church took this notion seriously, though, and archaeologists had found no trace of these mythical doomed cousins. Humans were humans, there was only one kind. Freelanders and Firmlanders could even intermarry—if they could agree where to live.

When I was fifteen, Daniel became engaged to Agnes from the Prayer Group. That made sense: they'd be spared the explanations and arguments about the Drowning that they might have faced with partners who weren't so blessed. Agnes was a Freelander, of course, but a large branch of her family, and a smaller branch of ours, were Firmlanders, so after long negotiations it was decided that the wedding would be held in Ferez, a coastal town.

I went with my father to pick a hull to be fitted out as Daniel and Agnes's boat. The breeder, Diana, had a string of six mature hulls in tow, and my father insisted on walking out onto their backs and personally examining each one for imperfections.

By the time we reached the fourth I was losing patience. I muttered, "It's the skin underneath that matters." In fact, you could tell a lot about a hull's general condition from up here, but there wasn't much point worrying about a few tiny flaws high above the waterline.

My father nodded thoughtfully. "That's true. You'd better get in the water and check their undersides."

"I'm not doing that." We couldn't simply trust this woman to sell us a healthy hull for a decent price; that wouldn't have been sufficiently embarrassing.

"Martin! This is for the safety of your brother and sister-in-law."

I glanced at Diana to show her where my sympathies lay, then slipped off my shirt and dived in. I swam down to the last hull in the row, then ducked beneath it. I began the job with perverse thoroughness, running my fingers over every square nanoradian of skin. I was determined to annoy my father by taking even longer than he wanted—and determined to impress Diana by examining all six hulls without coming up for air.

An unfitted hull rode higher in the water than a boat full of furniture and junk, but I was surprised to discover that even in the creature's shadow there was enough light for me to see the skin clearly. After a while I realized that, paradoxically, this was because the water was slightly cloudier than usual, and whatever the fine particles were, they were scattering sunlight into the shadows.

Moving through the warm, bright water, feeling the love of Beatrice more strongly than I had for a long time, it was impossible to remain angry with my father. He wanted the best hull for Daniel and Agnes, and so did I. As for impressing Diana . . . who was I kidding? She was a grown woman, at least as old as Agnes, and highly unlikely to view me as anything more than a child. By the time I'd finished with the third hull I was feeling short of breath, so I surfaced and reported cheerfully, "No blemishes so far!"

Diana smiled down at me. "You've got strong lungs."

All six hulls were in perfect condition. We ended up taking the one at the end of the row, because it was easiest to detach.

Ferez was built on the mouth of a river, but the docks were some distance upstream. That helped to prepare us; the gradual deadening of the waves was less of a shock than an instant transition from sea to land would have

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been. When I jumped from the deck to the pier, though, it was like colliding with something massive and unyielding, the rock of the planet itself. I'd been on land twice before, for less than a day on both occasions. The wedding celebrations would last ten days, but at least we'd still be able to sleep on the boat.

As the four of us walked along the crowded streets, heading for the ceremonial hall where everything but the wedding sacrament itself would take place, I stared uncouthly at everyone in sight. Almost no one was barefoot like us, and after a few hundred tau on the paving stones—much rougher than any deck—I could understand why. Our clothes were different, our skin was darker, our accent was unmistakably foreign . . . but no one stared back. Freelanders were hardly a novelty here. That made me even more self-conscious; the curiosity I felt wasn't mutual.

In the hall, I joined in with the preparations, mainly just lugging furniture around under the directions of one of Agnes's tyrannical uncles. It was a new kind of shock to see so many Freelanders together in this alien environment, and stranger still when I realized that I couldn't necessarily spot the Firmlanders among us; there was no sharp dividing line in physical appearance, or even clothing. I began to feel slightly guilty; if God couldn't tell the difference, what was I doing hunting for the signs?

At noon, we all ate outside, in a garden behind the hall. The grass was soft, but it made my feet itch. Daniel had gone off to be fitted for wedding clothes, and my parents were performing some vital task of their own; I only recognized a handful of the people around me. I sat in the shade of a tree, pretending to be oblivious to the plant's enormous size and bizarre anatomy. I wondered if we'd take a siesta; I couldn't imagine falling asleep on the grass.

Someone sat down beside me, and I turned.

"I'm Lena. Agnes's second cousin."

"I'm Daniel's brother, Martin." I hesitated, then offered her my hand; she took it, smiling slightly. I'd awkwardly kissed a dozen strangers that morning, all distant prospective relatives, but this time I didn't dare.

"Brother of the groom, doing grunt work with the rest of us." She shook her head in mocking admiration.

I desperately wanted to say something witty in reply, but an attempt that failed would be even worse than merely being dull. "Do you live in Ferez?"

"No, Mitar. Inland from here. We're staying with my uncle." She pulled a face. "Along with ten other people. No privacy. It's awful."

I said, "It was easy for us. We just brought our home with us." *You idiot. As if she didn't know that.*

Lena smiled. "I haven't been on a boat in years. You'll have to give me a tour sometime."

"Of course. I'd be happy to." I knew she was only making small talk; she'd never take me up on the offer.

She said, "Is it just you and Daniel?"

"Yes."

"You must be close."

I shrugged. "What about you?"

"Two brothers. Both younger. Eight and nine. They're all right, I suppose." She rested her chin on one hand and gazed at me coolly.

I looked away, disconcerted by more than my wishful thinking about what lay behind that gaze. Unless her parents had been awfully young when she was born, it didn't seem likely that more children were planned. So did an

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odd number in the family mean that one had died, or that the custom of equal numbers carried by each parent wasn't followed where she lived? I'd studied the region less than a year ago, but I had a terrible memory for things like that.

Lena said, "You looked so lonely, off here on your own."

I turned back to her, surprised. "I'm never lonely."

"No?"

She seemed genuinely curious. I opened my mouth to tell her about Beatrice, but then changed my mind. The few times I'd said anything to friends—ordinary friends, not Drowned ones—I'd regretted it. Not everyone had laughed, but they'd all been acutely embarrassed by the revelation.

I said, "Mitar has a million people, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"An area of ocean the same size would have a population of ten."

Lena frowned. "That's a bit too deep for me, I'm afraid." She rose to her feet. "But maybe you'll think of a way of putting it that even a Firmlander can understand." She raised a hand goodbye and started walking away.

I said, "Maybe I will."

The wedding took place in Ferez's Deep Church, a spaceship built of stone, glass, and wood. It looked almost like a parody of the churches I was used to, though it probably bore a closer resemblance to the Angels' real ship than anything made of living hulls.

Daniel and Agnes stood before the priest, beneath the apex of the building. Their closest relatives stood behind them in two angled lines on either side. My father—Daniel's mother—was first in our line, followed by my own mother, then me. That put me level with Rachel, who kept shooting disdainful glances my way. After my misadventure, Daniel and I had eventually been allowed to travel to the Prayer Group meetings again, but less than a year later I'd lost interest, and soon after I'd also stopped going to church. Beatrice was with me, constantly, and no gatherings or ceremonies could bring me any closer to Her. I knew Daniel disapproved of this attitude, but he didn't lecture me about it, and my parents had accepted my decision without any fuss. If Rachel thought I was some kind of apostate, that was her problem.

The priest said, "Which of you brings a bridge to this marriage?"

Daniel said, "I do." In the Transitional ceremony, they no longer asked this; it was really no one else's business—and in a way the question was almost sacrilegious. Still, Deep Church theologians had explained away greater doctrinal inconsistencies than this, so who was I to argue?

"Do you, Daniel and Agnes, solemnly declare that this bridge will be the bond of your union until death, to be shared with no other person?"

They replied together, "We solemnly declare."

"Do you solemnly declare that as you share this bridge, so shall you share every joy and every burden of marriage—equally?"

"We solemnly declare."

My mind wandered; I thought of Lena's parents. Maybe one of the family's children was adopted. Lena and I had managed to sneak away to the boat three times so far, early in the evenings while my parents were still out. We'd done things I'd never done with anyone else, but I still hadn't had the courage to ask her anything so personal.

Suddenly the priest was saying, "In the eyes of God, you are one now." My father started weeping softly. As Daniel and Agnes kissed, I felt a surge of

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contradictory emotions. I'd miss Daniel, but I was glad that I'd finally have a chance to live apart from him. And I wanted him to be happy—I was jealous of his happiness already—but at the same time, the thought of marrying someone like Agnes filled me with claustrophobia. She was kind, devout, and generous. She and Daniel would treat each other, and their children, well. But neither of them would present the slightest challenge to the other's most cherished beliefs.

This recipe for harmony terrified me. Not least because I was afraid that Beatrice approved, and wanted me to follow it myself.

Lena put her hand over mine and pushed my fingers deeper into her, gasping. We were sitting on my bunk, face to face, my legs stretched out flat, hers arching over them.

She slid the palm of her other hand over my penis. I bent forward and kissed her, moving my thumb over the place she'd shown me, and her shudder ran through both of us.

"Martin?"

"What?"

She stroked me with one fingertip; somehow it was far better than having her whole hand wrapped around me.

"Do you want to come inside me?"

I shook my head.

"Why not?"

She kept moving her finger, tracing the same line; I could barely think. *Why not?* "You might get pregnant."

She laughed. "Don't be stupid. I can control that. You'll learn, too. It's just a matter of experience."

I said, "I'll use my tongue. You liked that."

"I did. But I want something more now. And you do, too. I can tell." She smiled imploringly. "It'll be nice for both of us, I promise. Nicer than anything you've done in your life."

"Don't bet on it."

Lena made a sound of disbelief, and ran her thumb around the base of my penis. "I can tell you haven't put this inside anyone before. But that's nothing to be ashamed of."

"Who said I was ashamed?"

She nodded gravely. "All right. Frightened."

I pulled my hand free, and banged my head on the bunk above us. Daniel's old bunk.

Lena reached up and put her hand on my cheek.

I said, "I can't. We're not married."

She frowned. "I heard you'd given up on all that."

"All what?"

"Religion."

"Then you were misinformed."

Lena said, "This is what the Angels made our bodies to do. How can there be anything sinful in that?" She ran her hand down my neck, over my chest.

"But the bridge is meant to . . ." *What?* All the Scriptures said was that it was meant to unite men and women, equally. And the Scriptures said God couldn't tell women and men apart, but in the Deep Church, in the sight of God, the priest had just made Daniel claim priority. So why should I care what any priest thought?

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I said, "All right."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." I took her face in my hands and started kissing her. After a while, she reached down and guided me in. The shock of pleasure almost made me come, but I stopped myself somehow. When the risk of that had lessened, we wrapped our arms around each other and rocked slowly back and forth.

It wasn't better than my Drowning, but it was so much like it that it had to be blessed by Beatrice. And as we moved in each other's arms, I grew determined to ask Lena to marry me. She was intelligent and strong. She questioned everything. It didn't matter that she was a Firmlander; we could meet halfway, we could live in Ferez.

I felt myself ejaculate. "I'm sorry."

Lena whispered, "That's all right, that's all right. Just keep moving."

I was still hard; that had never happened before. I could feel her muscles clenching and releasing rhythmically, in time with our motion, and her slow exhalations. Then she cried out, and dug her fingers into my back. I tried to slide partly out of her again, but it was impossible, she was holding me too tightly. This was it. There was no going back.

Now I was afraid. "I've never—" Tears were welling up in my eyes; I tried to shake them away.

"I know. And I know it's frightening." She embraced me more tightly. "Just feel it, though. Isn't it wonderful?"

I was hardly aware of my motionless penis anymore, but there was liquid fire flowing through my groin, waves of pleasure spreading deeper. I said, "Yes. Is it like that for you?"

"It's different. But it's just as good. You'll find out for yourself, soon enough."

"I hadn't been thinking that far ahead," I confessed.

Lena giggled. "You've got a whole new life in front of you, Martin. You don't know what you've been missing."

She kissed me, then started pulling away. I cried out in pain, and she stopped. "I'm sorry. I'll take it slowly." I reached down to touch the place where we were joined; there was a trickle of blood escaping from the base of my penis.

Lena said, "You're not going to faint on me, are you?"

"Don't be stupid." I did feel queasy, though. "What if I'm not ready? What if I can't do it?"

"Then I'll lose my hold in a few hundred tau. The Angels weren't completely stupid."

I ignored this blasphemy, though it wasn't just any Angel who'd designed our bodies—it was Beatrice Herself. I said, "Just promise you won't use a knife."

"That's not funny. That really happens to people."

"I know." I kissed her shoulder. "I think—"

Lena straightened her legs slightly, and I felt the core break free inside me. Blood flowed warmly from my groin, but the pain had changed from a threat of damage to mere tenderness; my nervous system no longer spanned the lesion. I asked Lena, "Do you feel it? Is it part of you?"

"Not yet. It takes a while for the connections to form." She ran her fingers over my lips. "Can I stay inside you, until they have?"

I nodded happily. I hardly cared about the sensations anymore; it was just contemplating the miracle of being able to give a part of my body to Lena that

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was wonderful. I'd studied the physiological details long ago, everything from the exchange of nutrients to the organ's independent immune system—and I knew that Beatrice had used many of the same techniques for the bridge as She'd used with gestating embryos—but to witness Her ingenuity so dramatically at work in my own flesh was both shocking and intensely moving. Only giving birth could bring me closer to Her than this.

When we finally separated, though, I wasn't entirely prepared for the sight of what emerged. "Oh, that is disgusting!"

Lena shook her head, laughing. "New ones always look a bit . . . encrusted. Most of that stuff will wash away, and the rest will fall off in a few kilotau."

I bunched up the sheet to find a clean spot, then dabbed at my—her—penis. My newly formed vagina had stopped bleeding, but it was finally dawning on me just how much mess we'd made. "I'm going to have to wash this before my parents get back. I can put it out to dry in the morning, after they're gone, but if I don't wash it now they'll smell it."

We cleaned ourselves enough to put on shorts, then Lena helped me carry the sheet up onto the deck and drape it in the water from the laundry hooks. The fibers in the sheet would use nutrients in the water to power the self-cleaning process.

The docks appeared deserted; most of the boats nearby belonged to people who'd come for the wedding. I'd told my parents I was too tired to stay on at the celebrations; tonight they'd continue until dawn, though Daniel and Agnes would probably leave by midnight. To do what Lena and I had just done.

"Martin? Are you shivering?"

There was nothing to be gained by putting it off. Before whatever courage I had could desert me, I said, "Will you marry me?"

"Very funny. Oh—" Lena took my hand. "I'm sorry, I never know when you're joking."

I said, "We've exchanged the bridge. It doesn't matter that we weren't married first, but it would make things easier if we went along with convention."

"Martin—"

"Or we could just live together, if that's what you want. I don't care. We're already married in the eyes of Beatrice."

Lena bit her lip. "I don't want to live with you."

"I could move to Mitar. I could get a job."

Lena shook her head, still holding my hand. She said firmly, "*No.* You knew, before we did anything, what it would and wouldn't mean. You don't want to marry me, and I don't want to marry you. So snap out of it."

I pulled my hand free, and sat down on the deck. *What had I done?* I'd thought I'd had Beatrice's blessing, I'd thought this was all in Her plan . . . but I'd just been fooling myself.

Lena sat beside me. "What are you worried about? Your parents finding out?"

"Yes." That was the least of it, but it seemed pointless trying to explain the truth. I turned to her. "When could we—?"

"Not for about ten days. And sometimes it's longer after the first time."

I'd known as much, but I'd hoped her experience might contradict my theoretical knowledge. *Ten days.* We'd both be gone by then.

Lena said, "What do you think, you can never get married now? How many marriages do you imagine involve the bridge one of the partners was born with?"

"Nine out of ten. Unless they're both women."

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Lena gave me a look that hovered between tenderness and incredulity. "My estimate is about one in five."

I shook my head. "I don't care. We've exchanged the bridge, we have to be together." Lena's expression hardened, then so did my resolve. "Or I have to get it back."

"Martin, that's ridiculous. You'll find another lover soon enough, and then you won't even know what you were worried about. Or maybe you'll fall in love with a nice Deep Church boy, and then you'll both be glad you've been spared the trouble of getting rid of the extra bridge."

"Yeah? Or maybe he'll just be disgusted that I couldn't wait until I really *was* doing it for him!"

Lena groaned, and stared up at the sky. "Did I say something before about the Angels getting things right? Ten thousand years without bodies, and they thought they were qualified—"

I cut her off angrily. "Don't be so fucking blasphemous! Beatrice knew exactly what She was doing. If we mess it up, that's our fault!"

Lena said, matter-of-factly, "In ten years' time, there'll be a pill you'll be able to take to keep the bridge from being passed, and another pill to make it pass when it otherwise wouldn't. We'll win control of our bodies back from the Angels, and start doing exactly what we like with them."

"That's sick. That really is sick."

I stared at the deck, suffocating in misery. *This was what I'd wanted, wasn't it? A lover who was the very opposite of Daniel's sweet, pious Agnes?* Except that in my fantasies, we'd always had a lifetime to debate our philosophical differences. Not one night to be torn apart by them.

I had nothing to lose, now. I told Lena about my Drowning. She didn't laugh; she listened in silence.

I said, "Do you believe me?"

"Of course." She hesitated. "But have you ever wondered if there might be another explanation for the way you felt, in the water that night? You were starved of oxygen—"

"People are starved of oxygen all the time. Freelander kids spend half their lives trying to stay underwater longer than the last time."

Lena nodded. "Sure. But that's not quite the same, is it? You were pushed beyond the time you could have stayed under by sheer willpower. And . . . you were cued, you were told what to expect."

"That's not true. Daniel never told me what it would be like. I was *surprised* when it happened." I gazed back at her calmly, ready to counter any ingenious hypothesis she came up with. I felt chastened, but almost at peace now. This was what Beatrice had expected of me, before we'd exchanged the bridge: not a dead ceremony in a dead building, but the honesty to tell Lena exactly who she'd be making love with.

We argued almost until sunrise; neither of us convinced the other of anything. Lena helped me drag the clean sheet out of the water and hide it below deck. Before she left, she wrote down the address of a friend's house in Mitar, and a place and time we could meet.

Keeping that appointment was the hardest thing I'd ever done in my life. I spent three solid days ingratiating myself with my Mitar-based cousins, to the point where they would have had to be openly hostile to get out of inviting me to stay with them after the wedding. Once I was there, I had to scheme and lie relentlessly to ensure that I was free of them on the predetermined day.

In a stranger's house, in the middle of the afternoon, Lena and I joylessly

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reversed everything that had happened between us. I'd been afraid that the act itself might rekindle all my stupid illusions, but when we parted on the street outside, I felt as if I hardly knew her.

I ached even more than I had on the boat, and my groin was palpably swollen, but in a couple of days, I knew, nothing less than a lover's touch or a medical examination would reveal what I'd done.

In the train back to the coast, I replayed the entire sequence of events in my mind, again and again. *How could I have been so wrong?* People always talked about the power of sex to confuse and deceive you, but I'd always believed that was just cheap cynicism. Besides, I hadn't blindly surrendered to sex; I'd thought I'd been guided by Beatrice.

If I could be wrong about that—

I'd have to be more careful. Beatrice always spoke clearly, but I'd have to listen to Her with much more patience and humility.

That was it. That was what She'd wanted me to learn. I finally relaxed and looked out the window, at the blur of forest passing by, another triumph of the ecopoiesis. If I needed proof that there was always another chance, it was all around me now. The Angels had traveled as far from God as anyone could travel, and yet God had turned around and given them Covenant.

4

I was nineteen when I returned to Mitar, to study at the city's university. Originally, I'd planned to specialize in the ecopoiesis—and to study much closer to home—but in the end I'd had to accept the nearest thing on offer, geographically and intellectually: working with Barat, a Firmlander biologist whose real interest was native microfauna. "Angelic technology is a fascinating subject in its own right," he told me. "But we can't hope to work backward and decipher terrestrial evolution from anything the Angels created. The best we can do is try to understand what Covenant's own biosphere was like, before we arrived and disrupted it."

I managed to persuade him to accept a compromise: my thesis would involve the impact of the ecopoiesis on the native microfauna. That would give me an excuse to study the Angels' inventions, alongside the drab unicellular creatures that had inhabited Covenant for the last billion years.

"The impact of the ecopoiesis" was far too broad a subject, of course; with Barat's help, I narrowed it down to one particular unresolved question. There had long been geological evidence that the surface waters of the ocean had become both more alkaline, and less oxygenated, as new species shifted the balance of dissolved gases. Some native species must have retreated from the wave of change, and perhaps some had been wiped out completely, but there was a thriving population of zooytes in the upper layers at present. So had they been there all along, adapting *in situ?* Or had they migrated from somewhere else?

Mitar's distance from the coast was no real handicap in studying the ocean; the university mounted regular expeditions, and I had plenty of library and lab work to do before embarking on anything so obvious as gathering living samples in their natural habitat. What's more, river water, and even rainwater, was teeming with closely related species, and since it was possible that these were the reservoirs from which the "ravaged" ocean had been recolonized, I had plenty of subjects worth studying close at hand.

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Barat set high standards, but he was no tyrant, and his other students made me feel welcome. I was homesick, but not morbidly so, and I took a kind of giddy pleasure from the vivid dreams and underlying sense of disorientation that living on land induced in me. I wasn't exactly fulfilling my childhood ambition to uncover the secrets of the Angels—and I had fewer opportunities than I'd hoped to get side-tracked on the ecopoiesis itself—but once I started delving into the minutiae of Covenant's original, wholly undesigned biochemistry, it turned out to be complex and elegant enough to hold my attention.

I was only miserable when I let myself think about sex. I didn't want to end up like Daniel, so seeking out another Drowned person to marry was the last thing on my mind. But I couldn't face the prospect of repeating my mistake with Lena; I had no intention of becoming physically intimate with anyone unless we were already close enough for me to tell them about the most important thing in my life. But that wasn't the order in which things happened here. After a few humiliating attempts to swim against the current, I gave up on the whole idea, and threw myself into my work instead.

Of course, it *was* possible to socialize at Mitar University without actually exchanging bridges with anyone. I joined an informal discussion group on Angelic culture, which met in a small room in the students' building every tenth night—just like the old Prayer Group, though I was under no illusion that this one would be stacked with believers. It hardly needed to be. The Angels' legacy could be analyzed perfectly well without reference to Beatrice's divinity. The Scriptures were written long after the Crossing by people of a simpler age; there was no reason to treat them as infallible. If non-believers could shed some light on any aspect of the past, I had no grounds for rejecting their insights.

"It's obvious that only one faction came to Covenant!" That was Céline, an anthropologist, a woman so much like Lena that I had to make a conscious effort to remind myself, every time I set eyes on her, that nothing could ever happen between us. "*We're* not so homogeneous that we'd all choose to travel to another planet and assume a new physical form, whatever cultural forces might drive one small group to do that. So why should the Angels have been unanimous? The other factions must still be living in the Immaterial Cities, on Earth, and on other planets."

"Then why haven't they contacted us? In twenty thousand years, you'd think they'd drop in and say hello once or twice." David was a mathematician, a Freelander from the southern ocean.

Céline replied, "The attitude of the Angels who came here wouldn't have encouraged visitors. If all we have is a story of the Crossing in which Beatrice persuades every last Angel in existence to give up immortality—a version that simply erases everyone else from history—that doesn't suggest much of a desire to remain in touch."

A woman I didn't know interjected, "It might not have been so clear-cut from the start, though. There's evidence of settler-level technology being deployed for more than three thousand years after the Crossing, long after it was needed for the ecopoiesis. New species continued to be created, engineering projects continued to use advanced materials and energy sources. But then in less than a century, it all stopped. The Scriptures merge three separate decisions into one: renouncing immortality, migrating to Covenant, and abandoning the technology that might have provided an escape route if anyone changed their mind. But we *know* it didn't happen like that. Three

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thousand years after the Crossing, something changed. The whole experiment suddenly became irreversible."

These speculations would have outraged the average pious Freelander, let alone the average Drowned one, but I listened calmly, even entertaining the possibility that some of them could be true. The love of Beatrice was the only fixed point in my cosmology; everything else was open to debate.

Still, sometimes the debate was hard to take. One night, David joined us straight from a seminar of physicists. What he'd heard from the speaker was unsettling enough, but he'd already moved beyond it to an even less palatable conclusion.

"Why did the Angels choose mortality? After ten thousand years without death, why did they throw away all the glorious possibilities ahead of them, to come and die like animals on this ball of mud?" I had to bite my tongue to keep from replying to his rhetorical question: because God is the only source of eternal life, and Beatrice showed them that all they really had was a cheap parody of that divine gift.

David paused, then offered his own answer—which was itself a kind of awful parody of Beatrice's truth. "Because they discovered that they weren't immortal, after all. They discovered that *no one can be.* We've always known, as they must have, that the universe is finite in space and time. It's destined to collapse eventually: 'the stars will fall from the sky.' But it's easy to *imagine* ways around that." He laughed. "We don't know enough physics yet, ourselves, to rule out anything. I've just heard an extraordinary woman from Tia talk about coding our minds into waves that would orbit the shrinking universe so rapidly that we could think *an infinite number of thoughts* before everything was crushed!" David grinned joyfully at the sheer audacity of this notion. I thought primly: what blasphemous nonsense.

Then he spread his arms and said, "Don't you see, though? If the Angels *had* pinned their hopes on something like that—some ingenious trick that would keep them from sharing the fate of the universe—*but then they finally gained enough knowledge to rule out every last escape route,* it would have had a profound effect on them. Some small faction could then have decided that since they were mortal after all, they might as well embrace the inevitable, and come to terms with it in the way their ancestors had. In the flesh."

Céline said thoughtfully, "And the Beatrice myth puts a religious gloss on the whole thing, but that might be nothing but a *post hoc* reinterpretation of a purely secular revelation."

This was too much; I couldn't remain silent. I said, "If Covenant really was founded by a pack of terminally depressed atheists, what could have changed their minds? Where did the desire to impose a '*post hoc* reinterpretation' *come from?* If the revelation that brought the Angels here was 'secular,' why isn't the whole planet still secular today?"

Someone said snidely, "Civilization collapsed. What do you expect?"

I opened my mouth to respond angrily, but Céline got in first. "No, Martin has a point. If David's right, the rise of religion needs to be explained more urgently than ever. And I don't think anyone's in a position to do that yet."

Afterward, I lay awake thinking about all the other things I should have said, all the other objections I should have raised. (And thinking about Céline.) Theology aside, the whole dynamics of the group was starting to get under my skin; maybe I'd be better off spending my time in the lab, impressing Barat with my dedication to his pointless fucking microbes.

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Or maybe I'd be better off at home. I could help out on the boat; my parents weren't young anymore, and Daniel had his own family to look after.

I climbed out of bed and started packing, but halfway through I changed my mind. I didn't really want to abandon my studies. And I'd known all along what the antidote was for all the confusion and resentment I was feeling.

I put my rucksack away, switched off the lamp, lay down, closed my eyes, and asked Beatrice to grant me peace.

I was awakened by someone banging on the door of my room. It was a fellow boarder, a young man I barely knew. He looked extremely tired and irritable, but something was overriding his irritation.

"There's a message for you."

My mother was sick, with an unidentified virus. The hospital was even further away than our home grounds; the trip would take almost three days.

I spent most of the journey praying, but the longer I prayed, the harder it became. I *knew* that it was possible to save my mother's life with one word in the Angels' tongue to Beatrice, but the number of ways in which I could fail, corrupting the purity of the request with my own doubts, my own selfishness, my own complacency, just kept multiplying.

The Angels created nothing in the ecopoiesis that would harm their own mortal incarnations. The native life showed no interest in parasitizing us. But over the millennia, our own DNA had shed viruses. And since Beatrice Herself chose every last base pair, that must have been what She intended. Aging was not enough. Mortal injury was not enough. Death had to come without warning, silent and invisible.

That's what the Scriptures said.

The hospital was a maze of linked hulls. When I finally found the right passageway, the first person I recognized in the distance was Daniel. He was holding his daughter Sophie high in his outstretched arms, smiling up at her. The image dispelled all my fears in an instant; I almost fell to my knees to give thanks.

Then I saw my father. He was seated outside the room, his head in his hands. I couldn't see his face, but I didn't need to. He wasn't anxious, or exhausted. He was crushed.

I approached in a haze of last-minute prayers, though I knew I was asking for the past to be rewritten. Daniel started to greet me as if nothing was wrong, asking about the trip—probably trying to soften the blow—then he registered my expression and put a hand on my shoulder.

He said, "She's with God now."

I brushed past him and walked into the room. My mother's body was lying on the bed, already neatly arranged: arms straightened, eyes closed. Tears ran down my cheeks, angering me. Where had my love been when it might have prevented this? When Beatrice might have heeded it?

Daniel followed me into the room, alone. I glanced back through the doorway and saw Agnes holding Sophie.

"She's with God, Martin." He was beaming at me as if something wonderful had happened.

I said numbly, "She wasn't Drowned." I was almost certain that she hadn't been a believer at all. She'd remained in the Transitional church all her life—but that had long been the way to stay in touch with your friends when you worked on a boat nine days out of ten.

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"I prayed with her, before she lost consciousness. She accepted Beatrice into her heart."

I stared at him. Nine years ago he'd been certain: you were Drowned, or you were damned. It was as simple as that. My own conviction had softened long ago; I couldn't believe that Beatrice really was so arbitrary and cruel. But I knew my mother would not only have refused the full-blown ritual; the whole philosophy would have been as nonsensical to her as the mechanics.

"Did she say that? Did she tell you that?"

Daniel shook his head. "But it was clear." Filled with the love of Beatrice, he couldn't stop smiling.

A wave of revulsion passed through me; I wanted to grind his face into the deck. *He didn't care what my mother had believed.* Whatever eased his *own* pain, whatever put his own doubts to rest, had to be the case. To accept that she was damned—or even just dead, gone, erased—was unbearable; everything else flowed from that. *There was no truth in anything he said, anything he believed. It was all just an expression of his own needs.*

I walked back into the corridor and crouched beside my father. Without looking at me, he put an arm around me and pressed me against his side. I could feel the blackness washing over him, the helplessness, the loss. When I tried to embrace him he just clutched me more tightly, forcing me to be still. I shuddered a few times, then stopped weeping. I closed my eyes and let him hold me.

I was determined to stay there beside him, facing everything he was facing. But after a while, unbidden, the old flame began to glow in the back of my skull: the old warmth, the old peace, the old certainty. Daniel was right, my mother was with God. *How could I have doubted that?* There was no point asking how it had come about; Beatrice's ways were beyond my comprehension. But the one thing I knew firsthand was the strength of Her love.

I didn't move, I didn't free myself from my father's desolate embrace. But I was an impostor now, merely praying for his comfort, interceding from my state of grace. Beatrice had raised me out of the darkness, and I could no longer share his pain.

5

After my mother's death, my faith kept ceding ground, without ever really wavering. Most of the doctrinal content fell away, leaving behind a core of belief that was a great deal easier to defend. It didn't matter if the Scriptures were superstitious nonsense or the Church was full of fools and hypocrites; Beatrice was still Beatrice, the way the sky was still blue. Whenever I heard debates between atheists and believers, I found myself increasingly on the atheists' side—not because I accepted their conclusion for a moment, but because they were so much more honest than their opponents. Maybe the priests and theologians arguing against them had the same kind of direct, personal experience of God as I did—or maybe not, maybe they just desperately needed to believe. But they never disclosed the true source of their conviction; instead, they just made laughable attempts to "prove" God's existence from the historical record, or from biology, astronomy, or mathematics. Daniel had been right at the age of fifteen—you couldn't prove any such thing—and listening to these people twist logic as they tried made me squirm.

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I felt guilty about leaving my father working with a hired hand, and even guiltier when he moved onto Daniel's boat a year later, but I knew how angry it would have made him if he thought I'd abandoned my career for his sake. At times, that was the only thing that kept me in Mitar: even when I honestly wanted nothing more than to throw it all in and go back to hauling nets, I was afraid that my decision would be misinterpreted.

It took me three years to complete my thesis on the migration of aquatic zooytes in the wake of the ecopoiesis. My original hypothesis, that freshwater species had replenished the upper ocean, turned out to be false. Zooytes had no genes as such, just families of enzymes that re-synthesized each other after cell division, but comparisons of these heritable molecules showed that, rather than rain bringing new life from above, an ocean-dwelling species from a much greater depth had moved steadily closer to the surface, as the Angels' creations drained oxygen from the water. That wouldn't have been much of a surprise, if the same techniques hadn't also shown that several species found in river water were even closer relatives of the surface-dwellers. But those freshwater species weren't anyone's ancestors; they were the newest migrants. Zooytes that had spent a billion years confined to the depths had suddenly been able to survive (and reproduce, and mutate) closer to the surface than ever before, and when they'd stumbled on a mutation that let them thrive in the presence of oxygen, they'd finally been in a position to make use of it. The ecopoiesis might have driven other native organisms into extinction, but the invasion from Earth had enabled this ancient benthic species to mount a long overdue invasion of its own. Unwittingly or not, the Angels had set in motion the sequence of events that had released it from the ocean to colonize the planet.

So I proved myself wrong, earned my degree, and became famous amongst a circle of peers so small that we were all famous to each other anyway. Vast new territories did not open up before me. Anything to do with native biology was rapidly becoming an academic cul-de-sac; I'd always suspected that was how it would be, but I hadn't fought hard enough to end up anywhere else.

For the next three years, I clung to the path of least resistance: assisting Barat with his own research, taking the teaching jobs no one else wanted. Most of Barat's other students moved on to better things, and I found myself increasingly alone in Mitar. But that didn't matter; I had Beatrice.

At the age of twenty-five, I could see my future clearly. While other people deciphered—and built upon—the Angels' legacy, I'd watch from a distance, still messing about with samples of seawater from which all Angelic contaminants had been scrupulously removed.

Finally, when it was almost too late, I made up my mind to jump ship. Barat had been good to me, but he'd never expected loyalty verging on martyrdom. At the end of the year, a bi-ecological (native and Angelic) microbiology conference was being held in Tia, possibly the last event of its kind. I had no new results to present, but it wouldn't be hard to find a plausible excuse to attend, and it would be the ideal place to lobby for a new position. My great zooyte discovery hadn't been entirely lost on the wider community of biologists; I could try to rekindle the memory of it. I doubted there'd be much point offering to sleep with anyone; ethical qualms aside, my bridge had probably rusted into place.

Then again, maybe I'd get lucky. Maybe I'd stumble on a fellow Drowned Freelander who'd ended up in a position of power, and all I'd have to do was promise that my work would be for the greater glory of Beatrice.

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* * *

Tia was a city of ten million people on the east coast. New towers stood side-by-side with empty structures from the time of the Angels, giant gutted machines that might have played a role in the ecopoiesis. I was too old and proud to gawk like a child, but for all my provincial sophistication I wanted to. These domes and cylinders were twenty times older than the illustrations tattooed into the ceiling of the monastery back home. They bore no images of Beatrice; nothing of the Angels did. But why would they? They predated Her death.

The university, on the outskirts of Tia, was a third the size of Mitar itself. An underground train ringed the campus; the students I rode with eyed my unstylish clothes with disbelief. I left my luggage in the dormitory and headed straight for the conference center. Barat had chosen to stay behind; maybe he hadn't wanted to witness the public burial of his field. That made things easier for me; I'd be free to hunt for a new career without rubbing his face in it.

Late additions to the conference program were listed on a screen by the main entrance. I almost walked straight past the display; I'd already decided which talks I'd be attending. But three steps away, a title I'd glimpsed in passing assembled itself in my mind's eye, and I had to back-track to be sure I hadn't imagined it.

Carla Reggia: "Euphoric Effects of *Z/12/80* Excretions"

I stood there laughing with disbelief. I recognized the speaker and her coworkers by name, though I'd never had a chance to meet them. If this wasn't a hoax . . . what had they done? Dried it, smoked it, and tried writing that up as research? *Z/12/80* was one of "my" zooytes, one of the escapees from the ocean; the air and water of Tia were swarming with it. If its excretions were euphoric, the whole city would be in a state of bliss.

I knew, then and there, what they'd discovered. I *knew* it, long before I admitted it to myself. I went to the talk with my head full of jokes about neglected culture flasks full of psychotropic breakdown products, but for two whole days, I'd been steeling myself for the truth, finding ways in which it didn't have to matter.

Z/12/80, Carla explained, excreted among its waste products an amine that was able to bind to receptors in our Angel-crafted brains. Since it had been shown by other workers (no one recognized me; no one gave me so much as a glance) that *Z/12/80* hadn't existed at the time of the ecopoiesis, this interaction was almost certainly undesigned, and unanticipated. "It's up to the archaeologists and neurochemists to determine what role, if any, the arrival of this substance in the environment might have played in the collapse of early settlement culture. But for the past fifteen to eighteen thousand years, we've been swimming in it. Since we still exhibit such a wide spectrum of moods, we're probably able to compensate for its presence by down-regulating the secretion of the endogenous molecule that was designed to bind to the same receptor. That's just an educated guess, though. Exactly what the effects might be from individual to individual, across the range of doses that might be experienced under a variety of conditions, is clearly going to be a matter of great interest to investigators with appropriate expertise."

I told myself that I felt no disquiet. Beatrice acted on the world through the laws of nature; I'd stopped believing in supernatural miracles long ago. The fact that someone had now identified the way in which She'd acted on *me,* that night in the water, changed nothing.

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I pressed ahead with my attempts to get recruited. Everyone at the conference was talking about Carla's discovery, and when people finally made the connection with my own work, their eyes stopped glazing over halfway through my spiel. In the next three days, I received seven offers—all involving research into zooyte biochemistry. There was no question, now, of sidestepping the issue, of escaping into the wider world of Angelic biology. One man even came right out and said to me: "You're a Freelander, and you know that the ancestors of *Z/12/80* live in much greater numbers in the ocean. Don't you think *oceanic* exposure is going to be the key to understanding this?" He laughed. "I mean, you swam in the stuff as a child, didn't you? And you seem to have come through unscathed."

"Apparently."

On my last night in Tia, I couldn't sleep. I stared into the blackness of the room, watching the gray sparks dance in front of me. (Contaminants in the aqueous humor? Electrical noise in the retina? I'd heard the explanation once, but I could no longer remember it.)

I prayed to Beatrice in the Angels' tongue; I could still feel Her presence, as strongly as ever. The effect clearly wasn't just a matter of dosage, or trans-cutaneous absorption; merely swimming in the ocean at the right depth wasn't enough to make anyone feel Drowned. But in combination with the stress of oxygen starvation, and all the psychological build-up Daniel had provided, the jolt of zooyte piss must have driven certain neuroendocrine subsystems into new territory—or old territory, by a new path. *Peace, joy, contentment, the feeling of being loved* weren't exactly unknown emotions. But by short-circuiting the brain's usual practice of summoning those feelings only on occasions when there was a *reason* for them, I'd been "blessed with the love of Beatrice." I'd found happiness on demand.

And I still possessed it. That was the eeriest part. Even as I lay there in the dark, on the verge of reasoning everything I'd been living for out of existence, my ability to work the machinery was so ingrained that I felt as loved, as blessed as ever.

Maybe Beatrice was offering me another chance, making it clear that She'd still forgive this blasphemy and welcome me back. But why did I believe that there was anyone there to "forgive me"? You couldn't reason your way to God; there was only faith. And I knew, now, that the source of my faith was a meaningless accident, an unanticipated side-effect of the ecopoiesis.

I still had a choice. I could, still, decide that the love of Beatrice was immune to all logic, a force beyond understanding, untouched by evidence of any kind.

No, I couldn't. I'd been making exceptions for Her for too long. Everyone lived with double standards—but I'd already pushed mine as far as they'd go.

I started laughing and weeping at the same time. It was almost unimaginable: all the millions of people who'd been misled the same way. All because of the zooytes, and . . . what? One Freelander, diving for pleasure, who'd stumbled on a strange new experience? Then tens of thousands more repeating it, generation after generation—until one vulnerable man or woman had been driven to invest the novelty with meaning. Someone who'd needed so badly to feel loved and protected that the illusion of a real presence behind the raw emotion had been impossible to resist. Or who'd desperately wanted to believe that—in spite of the Angels' discovery that they, too, were mortal—death could still be defeated.

I was lucky: I'd been born in an era of moderation. I hadn't killed in the

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name of Beatrice. I hadn't suffered for my faith. I had no doubt that I'd been far happier for the last fifteen years than I would have been if I'd told Daniel to throw his rope and weights overboard without me.

But that didn't change the fact that the heart of it all had been a lie.

I woke at dawn, my head pounding, after just a few kilotau's sleep. I closed my eyes and searched for Her presence, as I had a thousand times before. *When I woke in the morning and looked into my heart, She was there without fail, offering me strength and guidance. When I lay in bed at night, I feared nothing, because I knew She was watching over me.*

There was nothing. She was gone.

I stumbled out of bed, feeling like a murderer, wondering how I'd ever live with what I'd done.

6

I turned down every offer I'd received at the conference, and stayed on in Mitar. It took Barat and me two years to establish our own research group to examine the effects of the zooamine, and nine more for us to elucidate the full extent of its activity in the brain. Our new recruits all had solid backgrounds in neurochemistry, and they did better work than I did, but when Barat retired I found myself the spokesperson for the group.

The initial discovery had been largely ignored outside the scientific community; for most people, it hardly mattered whether our brain chemistry matched the Angels' original design, or had been altered fifteen thousand years ago by some unexpected contaminant. But when the Mitar zooamine group began publishing detailed accounts of the biochemistry of religious experience, the public at large rediscovered the subject with a vengeance.

The university stepped up security, and despite death threats and a number of unpleasant incidents with stone-throwing protesters, no one was hurt. We were flooded with requests from broadcasters—though most were predicated on the notion that the group was morally obliged to "face its critics," rather than the broadcasters being morally obliged to offer us a chance to explain our work, calmly and clearly, without being shouted down by enraged zealots.

I learned to avoid the zealots, but the obscurantists were harder to dodge. I'd expected opposition from the Churches—defending the faith was their job, after all—but some of the most intellectually bankrupt responses came from academics in other disciplines. In one televised debate, I was confronted by a Deep Church priest, a Transitional theologian, a devotee of the ocean god Marni, and an anthropologist from Tia.

"This discovery has no real bearing on any belief system," the anthropologist explained serenely. "All truth is local. Inside every Deep Church in Ferez, Beatrice *is* the daughter of God, and we're the mortal incarnations of the Angels, who traveled here from Earth. In a coastal village a few milliradians south, Marni is the supreme creator, and it was She who gave birth to us, right here. Going one step further and moving from the spiritual domain to the scientific might appear to 'negate' certain spiritual truths . . . but equally, moving from the scientific domain to the spiritual demonstrates the same limitations. We are nothing but the stories we tell ourselves, and no one story is greater than another." He smiled beneficently, the expression of a par-

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ent only too happy to give all his squabbling children an equal share in some disputed toy.

I said, "How many cultures do you imagine share your definition of 'truth'? How many people do you think would be content to worship a God who consisted of literally nothing but the fact of their belief?" I turned to the Deep Church priest. "Is that enough for you?"

"Absolutely not!" She glowered at the anthropologist. "While I have the greatest respect for my brother here," she gestured at the devotee of Marni, "you can't draw a line around those people who've been lucky enough to be raised in the true faith, and then suggest that *Beatrice's* infinite power and love is confined to that group of people . . . like some collection of folk songs!"

The devotee respectfully agreed. Marni had created the most distant stars, along with the oceans of Covenant. Perhaps some people called Her by another name, but if everyone on this planet was to die tomorrow, She would still be Marni: unchanged, undiminished.

The anthropologist responded soothingly, "Of course. But in context, and with a wider perspective—"

"I'm perfectly happy with a God who resides within us," offered the Transitional theologian. "It seems . . . *immodest* to expect more. And instead of fretting uselessly over these ultimate questions, we should confine ourselves to matters of a suitably human scale."

I turned to him. "So you're actually indifferent as to whether an infinitely powerful and loving being created everything around you, and plans to welcome you into Her arms after death . . . or if the universe is a piece of quantum noise that will eventually vanish and erase us all?"

He sighed heavily, as if I was asking him to perform some arduous physical feat just by responding. "I can summon no enthusiasm for these issues."

Later, the Deep Church priest took me aside and whispered, "Frankly, we're all very grateful that you've debunked that awful cult of the Drowned. They're a bunch of fundamentalist hicks, and the Church will be better off without them. But you mustn't make the mistake of thinking that your work has anything to do with ordinary, civilized believers!"

I stood at the back of the crowd that had gathered on the beach near the rock pool, to listen to the two old men who were standing ankle-deep in the milky water. It had taken me four days to get here from Mitar, but when I'd heard reports of a zooyte bloom washing up on the remote north coast, I'd had to come and see the results for myself. The zooamine group had actually recruited an anthropologist for such occasions—one who could cope with such taxing notions as the existence of objective reality, and a biochemical substrate for human thought—but Céline was only with us for part of the year, and right now she was away doing other research.

"This is an ancient, sacred place!" one man intoned, spreading his arms to take in the pool. "You need only observe the shape of it to understand that. It concentrates the energy of the stars, and the sun, and the ocean."

"The focus of power is there, by the inlet," the other added, gesturing at a point where the water might have come up to his calves. "Once, I wandered too close. I was almost lost in the great dream of the ocean, when my friend here came and rescued me!"

These men weren't devotees of Marni, or members of any other formal religion. As far as I'd been able to tell from old news reports, the blooms occurred every eight or ten years, and the two had set themselves up as "custodians" of

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the pool more than fifty years ago. Some local villagers treated the whole thing as a joke, but others revered the old men. And for a small fee, tourists and locals alike could be chanted over, then splashed with the potent brew. Evaporation would have concentrated the trapped waters of the bloom; for a few days, before the zooytes ran out of nutrients and died *en masse* in a cloud of hydrogen sulphide, the amine would be present in levels as high as in any of our laboratory cultures back in Mitar.

As I watched people lining up for the ritual, I found myself trying to downplay the possibility that anyone could be seriously affected by it. It was broad daylight, no one feared for their life, and the old men's pantheistic gobbledygook carried all the gravitas of the patter of streetside scam merchants. Their marginal sincerity, and the money changing hands, would be enough to undermine the whole thing. This was a tourist trap, not a life-altering experience.

When the chanting was done, the first customer knelt at the edge of the pool. One of the custodians filled a small metal cup with water and threw it in her face. After a moment, she began weeping with joy. I moved closer, my stomach tightening. *It was what she'd known was expected of her, nothing more. She was playing along, not wanting to spoil the fun—like the good sports who pretended to have their thoughts read by a carnival psychic.*

Next, the custodians chanted over a young man. He began swaying giddily even before they touched him with the water; when they did, he broke into sobs of relief that racked his whole body.

I looked back along the queue. There was a young girl standing third in line now, looking around apprehensively; she could not have been more than nine or ten. Her father (I presumed) was standing behind her, with his hand against her back, as if gently propelling her forward.

I lost all interest in playing anthropologist. I forced my way through the crowd until I reached the edge of the pool, then turned to address the people in the queue. "These men are frauds! There's nothing mysterious going on here. I can tell you exactly what's in the water: it's just a drug, a natural substance given out by creatures that are trapped here when the waves retreat."

I squatted down and prepared to dip my hand in the pool. One of the custodians rushed forward and grabbed my wrist. He was an old man, I could have done what I liked, but some people were already jeering, and I didn't want to scuffle with him and start a riot. I backed away from him, then spoke again.

"I've studied this drug for more than ten years, at Mitar University. It's present in water all over the planet. We drink it, we bathe in it, we swim in it every day. But it's concentrated here, and if you don't understand what you're doing when you use it, that misunderstanding can harm you!"

The custodian who'd grabbed my wrist started laughing. "The dream of the ocean is powerful, yes, but we don't need your advice on that! For fifty years, my friend and I have studied its lore, until we were strong enough to *stand* in the sacred water!" He gestured at his leathery feet; I didn't doubt that his circulation had grown poor enough to limit the dose to a tolerable level.

He stretched out his sinewy arm at me. "So fuck off back to Mitar, Inlander! Fuck off back to your books and your dead machinery! What would you know about the sacred mysteries? *What would you know about the ocean?*"

I said, "I think you're out of your depth."

I stepped into the pool. He started wailing about my unpurified body polluting the water, but I brushed past him. The other custodian came after me, but though my feet were soft after years of wearing shoes, I ignored the

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sharp edges of the rocks and kept walking toward the inlet. The zooamine helped. I could feel the old joy, the old peace, the old "love"; it made a powerful anesthetic.

I looked back over my shoulder. The second man had stopped pursuing me; it seemed he honestly feared going any further. I pulled off my shirt, bunched it up, and threw it onto a rock at the side of the pool. Then I waded forward, heading straight for the "focus of power."

The water came up to my knees. I could feel my heart pounding, harder than it had since childhood. People were shouting at me from the edge of the pool—some outraged by my sacrilege, some apparently concerned for my safety in the presence of forces beyond my control. Without turning, I called out at the top of my voice, "There is no 'power' here! There's nothing 'sacred'! There's nothing here but a drug—"

Old habits die hard; I almost prayed first. *Please, Holy Beatrice, don't let me regain my faith.*

I lay down in the water and let it cover my face. My vision turned white; I felt like I was leaving my body. The love of Beatrice flooded into me, and nothing had changed: Her presence was as palpable as ever, as undeniable as ever. I *knew* that I was loved, accepted, forgiven.

I waited, staring into the light, almost expecting a voice, a vision, detailed hallucinations. That had happened to some of the Drowned. How did anyone ever claw their way back to sanity, after that?

But for me, there was only the emotion itself, overpowering but unembellished. It didn't grow monotonous; I could have basked in it for days. But I understood, now, that it said no more about my place in the world than the warmth of sunlight on skin. I'd never mistake it for the touch of a real hand again.

I climbed to my feet and opened my eyes. Violet afterimages danced in front of me. It took a few tau for me to catch my breath, and feel steady on my feet again. Then I turned and started wading back toward the shore.

The crowd had fallen silent, though whether it was in disgust or begrudging respect I had no idea.

I said, "It's not just here. It's not just in the water. It's part of us now; it's in our blood." I was still half-blind; I couldn't see whether anyone was listening. "But as long as you know that, you're already free. As long as you're ready to face the possibility that everything that makes your spirits soar, everything that lifts you up and fills your heart with joy, *everything that makes your life worth living* . . . is a lie, is corruption, is meaningless—then you can never be enslaved!"

They let me walk away unharmed. I turned back to watch as the line formed again; the girl wasn't in the queue.

I woke with a start, from the same old dream.

I was lowering my mother into the water from the back of the boat. Her hands were tied, her feet weighted. She was afraid, but she'd put her trust in me. "You'll bring me up safely, won't you, Martin?"

I nodded reassuringly. But once she'd vanished beneath the waves, I thought: What am I doing? I don't believe in this shit any more.

So I took out a knife and started cutting through the rope—

I brought my knees up to my chest, and crouched on the unfamiliar bed in the darkness. I was in a small town on the railway line, halfway back to Mitar. Halfway between midnight and dawn.

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I dressed, and made my way out of the hostel. The center of town was deserted, and the sky was thick with stars. Just like home. In Mitar, everything vanished in a fog of light.

All three of the stars cited by various authorities as the Earth's sun were above the horizon. If they weren't all mistakes, perhaps I'd live to see a telescope's image of the planet itself. But the prospect of seeking contact with the Angels—if there really was a faction still out there, somewhere—left me cold. I shouted silently up at the stars: *Your degenerate offspring don't need your help! Why should we rejoin you? We're going to surpass you!*

I sat down on the steps at the edge of the square and covered my face. Bravado didn't help. Nothing helped. Maybe if I'd grown up facing the truth, I would have been stronger. But when I woke in the night, knowing that my mother was simply dead, that everyone I'd ever loved would follow her, that I'd vanish into the same emptiness myself, it was like being buried alive. It was like being back in the water, bound and weighted, with the certain knowledge that there was no one to haul me up.

Someone put a hand on my shoulder. I looked up, startled. It was a man about my own age. His manner wasn't threatening; if anything, he looked slightly wary of me.

He said, "Do you need a roof? I can let you into the Church if you want." There was a trolley packed with cleaning equipment a short distance behind him.

I shook my head. "It's not that cold." I was too embarrassed to explain that I had a perfectly good room nearby. "Thanks."

As he was walking away, I called after him, "Do you believe in God?"

He stopped and stared at me for a while, as if he was trying to decide if this was a trick question—as if I might have been hired by the local parishioners to vet him for theological soundness. Or maybe he just wanted to be diplomatic with anyone desperate enough to be sitting in the town square in the middle of the night, begging a stranger for reassurance.

He shook his head. "As a child I did. Not anymore. It was a nice idea . . . but it made no sense." He eyed me skeptically, still unsure of my motives.

I said, "Then isn't life unbearable?"

He laughed. "Not all the time!"

He went back to his trolley, and started wheeling it toward the Church.

I stayed on the steps, waiting for dawn. O

We appreciate comments about the magazine, and would like to hear from more of our readers. Editorial correspondence should include the writer's name and mailing address, even if you use e-mail. Letters can be e-mailed to asimovs@erols.com or posted to Letters to the Editor, *Asimov's*, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. Letters may be shortened and edited for publication. The e-mail address is for editorial correspondence *only*—questions about subscriptions should be directed to Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80322-4625.

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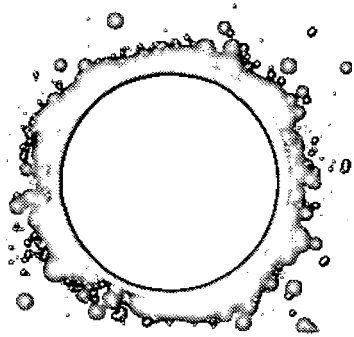
BLACK HOLE, BLACK HOLE

Black hole, black hole,
have you any pull?
Yes, sir, yes, sir,
I am very full—

full of interstellar dust,
full of fallen light,
full of every dream you've ever
sent into the night . . .

Black hole, black hole,
are you very full?
Yes, sir, I have
quite a
lot
of
p
u
l
l.

—W. Gregory Stewart



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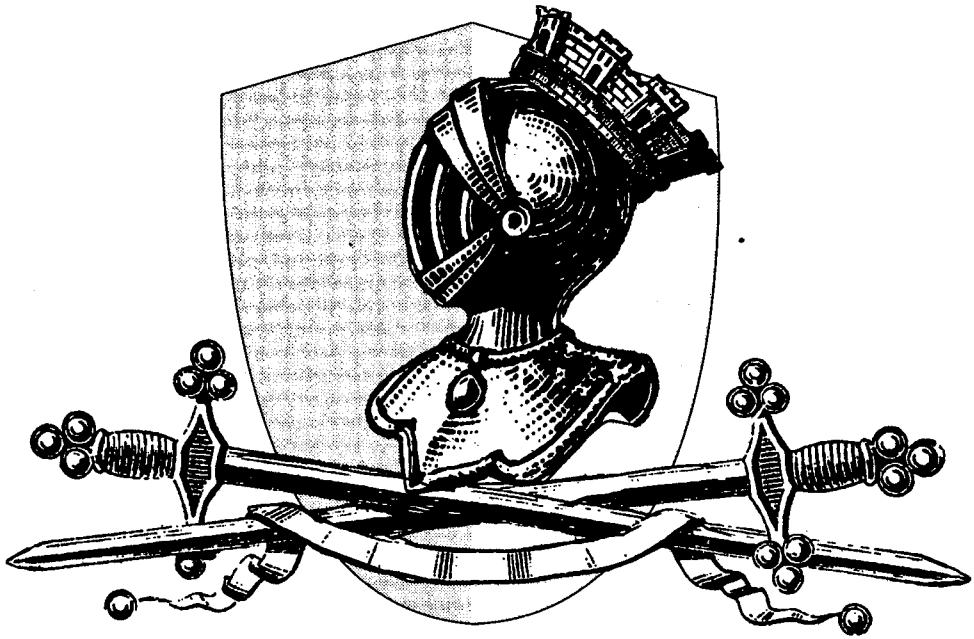
Esther M. Friesner

When the Queen of Air and Darkness must face majorly issues like the dysfunctional family, guilt transference, and classic victim syndrome, you know you're in . . .



TOTALLY CAMELOT

Above the ancient standing stones the skies were harrowed with the passage of fiery stars such as foretold the death of kings. Within their shadow there dreamed the ensorcelled barrow where great Morgan le Fey convened her seelie court. From the distant battlefield of Camlann, the winds that blew across the gently rising hump of turf carried with them the phantom groans of the slain and the wailing of women bereft and bereaved, all these unheard and unheeded by the dwellers underground.

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Beneath the great elf-mound all was revelry, but joy and wanton merry-making both ceased in an instant at the sound of hard-soled boots upon the stones. Wild song and wilder dance died outright at the coming of the messenger from the kingdoms of men who strode into the great hall and proclaimed in a voice of heartbreak, "*Arthur is slain!*"

And in the awful silence that followed, great Morgan looked up from the adoring eyes of the young elfin bard who had been wooing her with songs of courtly love. Her face was stricken white as bone, her eyes two darkened moons made both bright and tender with astonishment and grief, and the flower of her mouth opened to cry out in the heart's deepest pain:

"No *way!*"

"Aye, milady." The messenger knelt upon the rich silk carpets that bestrewed the hidden palace. "Way."

"Oh wow," said the Queen of Air and Darkness. "If you're yanking my chain, you are *so* majorly toast when I get back." And she summoned up her dragon-drawn chariot and, whisking the cloak of night about her shoulders, she burst from the elf-mound back into the kingdoms of men.

She was not gone longer than it took for her subjects to fall into a dozen different clusters, each abuzz with dire speculations, their terrified whispers filling the high, tapestry-hung hall. She was back among them in a flash of flame less devastating than the look of utter rage and despair in her eyes.

"So 'kay, he *is* dead," she announced. "Well, not *totally* dead yet but, like, you know, close enough for jazz. Bummer."

An elf-maid of surpassing beauty, even among the Fair Folk, came forward to kneel before her liege lady. "Your Majesty, how came this calamity to pass?"

Great Morgan scowled. "Bug off, Betty; I don't wanna talk about it."

The elf-maid slowly arose to her feet and called her courage to her, armor puissant albeit invisible. Daring more than death, she reached out one slim hand and rested it upon great Morgan's shoulder. "I feel your pain, but if you don't verbalize your trauma, you're going to internalize it and the resulting neurosis can't help but disalign your chakras."

The Queen of Air and Darkness glowered at her handmaiden and out of her parlous anguish and woeful torment of soul rejoined, "Hey Betty, go fuck yourself, 'kay?"

Before the elf-maid could summon a reply, one of her faerie sisters, almost as lovely to behold as she, came forth to share good counsel: "She's in denial. Give her time to heal." Then turning to the Queen of Air and Darkness she said, "Your gracious Majesty, we respect your personal space, but take, I prithee, this small token of the sorrow we all share." And she offered up unto great Morgan a volume bound all in purple velvet and the finest leathers made in distant Hispania, with massive hinges of gilded bronze, and emblazoned upon the cover thereof in figures of gold were the mystic words: *Quasi-Immortal Kings of Britain and the Faerie Queens Who Love Them.*

The Queen of Air and Darkness most graciously took this gift into both her hands, and lo, with both her hands she flung it at her handmaiden's head with great force so that the audacious elf-maid needs must eftsoons hit the dirt. "What are you, a 'tard?" the queen demanded. "I *said* I don't wanna talk about it, so unless you are, like, totally clueless, leave me alone!"

"O Morgan, my sister, stay thy wrath!" A voice of infinite power and infinite sweetness filled the rafters of the fairy palace. A tall lady clad all in white samite stood arrayed in her full beauty before the seelie court. Those

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elfin courtiers who served Queen Morgan fell to their knees, for they knew themselves to be in the presence of the lady Vivien, she who was likewise yclept the Lady of the Lake.

And great Morgan arose from her throne and extended one hand to her sister-queen, saying, "Hel*lo*. Middle Earth to Vivien: Wipe your feet. You're dripping goldfish all over the carpet."

"Forsooth, why else would men name it *carp*-et?" the lady Vivien replied, and she did snicker loud and long. Then, as her own sadness once more overcame her, she took her sister to her bosom, saying, "Let not thy spirit erroneously suffer for the sake of a false culpability. Thy son Modred did give thy brother-husband Arthur his death-wound upon the field of Camlann, yet for this no blame is thine."

And the Queen of Air and Darkness at last broke into tears of stormy grief for her lost lord, wailing in her sister's arms, "Oh wow, Vivien, how could any kid of mine turn out to be, you know, majorly whack? I mean, I just could *not* believe he snuffed his own daddy. I went straight to Sir Percival the Pure—*talk* about posers—and I'm all 'wassup?' and he's all 'Modred went postal; he's roadkill, so's Arthur, end of story, folk song at eleven.' I am *so* buggin' all I wanna do is hurl."

"Aha!" cried the first elf-maid, she who in the arcane tongue of the Elder Race was called Betty. "So *that's* the dynamic at work here: Dysfunctional family, guilt transference, classic victim syndrome—"

Overhearing this, great Morgan flashed the maiden a look that might slay dragons and shouted, "If you don't put a sock in it, Betty, I'm gonna bite your dumbass head off!"

"—eating disorder . . ."

The Lady of the Lake intervened ere her sister-queen might take a just revenge upon the undutiful handmaiden. "Arthur lies wounded unto death hard by the field of Camlann," she intoned. "He lies beyond reach of all our hopes and sorrows, yet still there is one labor of greatest love which we can and must perform for his sake."

"Euw," said Morgan. "You mean we gotta bury him?"

"Aye, for did we not, 'twould be a grave matter," said Vivien. And again she did snicker.

"Wha*tever*. But if he's dead when we get there, I'm not touching him. Ga*ross*." Thus spake great Morgan.

A rumbling as of thunder or the oncoming roar of a company of war chariots shook the hall. Smoke the dark and direful shade of ancient blood billowed up before great Morgan's throne and from the cloud's frightful heart there stepped a man bedecked with beard of snow and robes of deepest blue, scattered with silvery runes and sigils of unspeakable power.

"Morgan, *dah*-ling, you're looking *too* fabulous! Kiss-kiss." And lo, the wizard men named Merlin hurried forward to embrace the Queen of Air and Darkness.

"Merlin?" The lady Vivien stood perplexed. "How com'st thou here? I thought that I had long ago, by my dread arts, entombed thee within the heartwood of an oak."

The wizard fixed her with ominous gaze and replied, "You mean you *tried,* Miss Thing. Only it didn't quite work out the way you planned, did it? Bitch." And the tongue which he put out at the lady Vivien was both supple as an otter and as clever.

"By the Powers!" Vivien gasped. "Meseems I did bark up the wrong tree." And this time the lady's snicker ended in a mighty snort.

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"Puh-*leez.*" Merlin made a lissome gesture as if sorcery might banish the lady's sally to the nether realms. "I came here to help you take care of Artie, but if you're going to be like *that,* I am just going to take my wand and go right back home this very minute."

"Well, don't get your loincloth in a knot or anything," the Queen of Air and Darkness chided the all-wise enchanter. "We've got a king to bury, you know? Only if he's got blood all over him or some junk, *you* get to touch him 'cause *no* way am I going *there,* girlfriend. 'Kay?"

"Well, it sounds a little kinky for *my* tastes, but when in Rome, for a good time call Caligula," said Merlin.

Thus it did fall out that when King Arthur lay a-dying, he called unto him his one remaining knight, brave Sir Bedivere, a good man and true. Clasping Sir Bedivere's hand between both his own he spoke unto him, saying:

"Oy. Such a *zetz* that no-good *momzer* son of mine gave me, it's a miracle I'm not dead yet. But a headache I've got like you shouldn't know from. Listen, Bedivere-*bubbe,* I got a favor to ask. . . ."

And brave Sir Bedivere, his voice nigh overcome with tears, sobbed out in misery and distress of heart, "Ask what you will of me, my lord, and though it be the sacrifice of mine own life for thine, it shall be done!"

"Thine own life for mine?" King Arthur echoed, regarding his devoted follower with affection. Then he turned aside his head and spat thrice, saying, "*Kine ahora.* Don't talk like that about dying, a nice, healthy boy like you. *Feh.* Crazy talk, that's what it is. Who needs to know from crazies? If I wanted to hire a *meshuggener,* I could've taken that *putz* Modred into the family business, he should only grow like an onion with his head in the ground. Which he's doing. No, look, what I want you should do for me is take my sword and throw it in the lake over there."

"Thy sword Excalibur?" Sir Bedivere exclaimed, falling back in shock at his master's command.

"No, my sword Murray. Of course my sword Excalibur! Listen, I'm not a well man. I got about as much time left as a slice of lox on a Haddassah buffet table, so don't make me repeat myself. I said I want you should take Excalibur and, *schoen,* throw it in the lake. By you this is a big *megillah?*"

And Sir Bedivere bowed his head in sorrow and replied, "Nay, Your Majesty, by me this is not a big *megillah.*"

Thereat he did take from his master's hand the spellbound blade hight Excalibur and bore it to the verge of the enchanted lake whence it first arose. He held the blade aloft and thrice did brandish it above his head, and then did cast it from him as far over the drear waters as he might. Far and high flew the blade, yet when at last it fell it did not sink beneath the waters. Nay, for there at once shot up from the depths an arm clad all in white samite which caught the blade that Bedivere did fling. And lo, that fair and graceful arm likewise saluted thrice with the sword Excalibur before sinking again beneath the surface of the lake. All then was silence.

Gladly upon the moment would Sir Bedivere have returned with all good speed to the side of his dying lord, but as he turned his tearful countenance from the lake he found himself face to face with the mighty wizard Merlin. Then Merlin stayed Sir Bedivere with a mystic gesture of his upraised hand and hailed him after this fashion:

"Hel*lo,* sailor. I saw how you handled that great big nasty blade, mmm-*hm!* Aren't *you* the strong one? The way you worked those shoulders—*too* mar-

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velous—and I don't even want to *think* about what your abs must look like. Whoo! Is it hot out here or is it just you?" And he did flutter his hands rapidly before his face, uttering in accents weird: "Ah have always depended on the chivalry of stranjuhs."

"Seek not to stay me with thy uncanny conjurations but stand aside, Magician!" cried Sir Bedivere. "Aye, stand aside, as you value your life, for though you command an hundred dreadful spells, I will dare the hosts of Hell itself an they come between me and my lord King Arthur!"

"Tsk. *Too* butch to be believed," said Merlin, shaking his head slowly as he stepped aside. Yet as Sir Bedivere stormed past he called after that faithful knight, "Don't bother looking for Artie back there, sweetheart! He's gone. The girls have got him." And Merlin sighed in heaviness of heart, adding, "The story of my life."

Now rapt in some enchantment that sprang from realms unknown, Sir Bedivere found his feet did draw him back will-he-nil-he, unto the lakeshore, and there he beheld a wondrous sight: A sumptuous funeral barge hung with black velvet drifted in solemn state across the waters. Upon that barge there rested a bier draped with rich cloths of midnight hue, and upon that bier did lie the body of bold Uther Pendragon's son, Arthur, King of the Britons. Round about the bier did kneel in mourning three queens of more than earthly beauty, and they did make grievous moan over the body of Arthur, thus:

"I can *not* believe this, it is just *mega* harsh! I mean, *hello,* where is it carved in stone that you gotta wear black for mourning? Black is *so* last season!"

"An it be last season, O my royal sister, then thou must not fall into a rage nor spring to conclusions, but bear in mind that not all women share thy distress. You winter some, you lose some, and summer perfectly content to wear black." (And Sir Bedivere stood astonied to hear the sound of snickering drift out across the lake, but in the end decided it must be owls.)

"Vivien, you are *such* a lame-o."

"Uh-uh-uh! Your Majesty's transferring again! What did we say about confronting our grief? Don't hold back, my royal lady Morgan; tell us how you *really* feel. Get in touch with your inner fey. Hey, let's do an exercise—"

"Ohmahgahd, Betty, haven't you, like, fucked off *yet?*"

And the barge was lost to sight and vanished into the mists.

Then Sir Bedivere wept, and went his ways. Betimes he came unto the abbey church that stood at Glastonbury and he did speak with the learned churchmen who dwelled there of those unearthly visions which he had witnessed touching on the passing of the King. Thereat the holy abbot caused all this to be inscribed in the chronicles, and likewise that a stone be raised whereon was writ: *Hic Iacet Rex Arthurus, Quondam Rex Atque Futurus.*

For all men know that Arthur is not dead, but sleeps. So shall he sleep on until that most desperate hour when all Britain stands in greatest need. Then shall he rise again, and cast aside the power of the grave, and take up his good sword once more in defense of the right, for even Death's might may not stand against him who truly is the Once and Future King!

As if. ❍

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THE VERACITY OF IMAGINATION

by Bruce Boston

Impossible . . . they once said!
Nothing moves faster than light.
It's beyond the constraints
of the space/time continuum.
Yet now we do it everyday!
Blood and sweat and calculation

sends these behemoths flickering
through the interstellar dark
to emerge beside a farther star.
Human desperation/aspiration
to transcend the static moment,
to deliver any given reality

our ftl-minds can comprehend:
this is the force that drives
our being through the night
and folds the fabric of space.
And as the planes of the plenum
open to us, one way or a dozen,

open like the palm of a hand,
like a wound, like the wings
of the gigantic lepidopteron
of Fretas IV as it first senses
the rays of its blue-white sun,
the unconstrained universe

will be splayed and revealed.
Impossible . . . they always say!
As they have learned to say.
Meet me in shades of tomorrow!
And remember we are forever
touching the body of space.

Illustration by Shirley Ciban

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Stephen Baxter

British author Stephen Baxter holds a Ph.D. in engineering as well as an MBA. Honors for his novels include the Philip K. Dick Award, the John W. Campbell Memorial Award, and the Japanese Seiun Award. He is the author of eight science fiction novels, and his short stories have appeared in *Asimov's*, *Analog*, *Interzone*, and *Playboy*. In his latest tale, Mr. Baxter takes a remarkable look at the nature of . . .

DANTE DREAMS

Illustration by Mark Evans

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She was flying.

She felt light, insubstantial, like a child in the arms of her father.

Looking back, she could see the Earth, heavy and massive and unmoving, at the center of everything, a ball of water folded over on itself.

Rising ever faster, she passed through a layer of glassy light, like an airliner climbing through cloud. She saw how the layer of light folded over the planet, shimmering like an immense soap bubble. Embedded in the membrane she could see a rocky ball, like a lumpy cloud, below them and receding.

It was the Moon.

Philmus woke, gasping, scared.

Another Dante dream.

. . . But was it just a dream? Or was it a glimpse of the thoughts of the deep chemical mind that—perhaps—shared her body?

She sat up in bed and reached for her tranqsat earpiece. It had been, she thought, one hell of a case.

It hadn't been easy getting into the Vatican, even for a UN sentience cop.

The Swiss Guard who processed Philmus was dressed like something out of the sixteenth century, literally: a uniform of orange and blue with a giant plumed helmet. But he used a softscreen, and under his helmet he bore the small scars of tranqsat receiver implants.

It was eight in the morning. She saw that the thick clouds over the cobbled courtyards were beginning to break up to reveal patches of celestial blue. It was fake, of course, but the city Dome's illusion was good.

Philmus was here to study the Virtual reconstruction of Eva Himmelfarb.

Himmelfarb was a young Jesuit scientist-priest who had caused a lot of trouble. Partly by coming up with—from nowhere, untrained—a whole new Theory of Everything. Partly by discovering a new form of intelligence, or by going crazy, depending on which fragmentary account Philmus chose to believe.

Mostly by committing suicide.

Sitting in this encrusted, ancient building, in the deep heart of Europe, pondering the death of a priest, Philmus felt a long way from San Francisco.

At last, the guard was done with his paperwork. He led Philmus deeper into the Vatican, past huge and intimidating ramparts, and into the Apostolic Palace. Sited next to St. Peter's, this was a building that housed the quarters of the Pope himself, along with various branches of the Curia, the huge administrative organization of the Church.

The corridors were narrow and dark. Philmus caught glimpses of people working in humdrum-looking offices, with softscreens and coffee cups and pinned-up strip cartoons, mostly in Italian. The Vatican seemed to her like the headquarters of a modern multinational—Nanosoft, say—run by a medieval bureaucracy. That much she'd expected.

What she hadn't anticipated was the great sense of age here. She was at the heart of a very large, very old, spiderweb.

And somewhere in this complex of buildings was an aging Nigerian who was held, by millions of people, even in the fourth decade of the twenty-first century, to be literally infallible. She shivered.

She was taken to the top floor, and left alone in a corridor.

The view from here, of Rome bathed in the city Dome's golden, filtered dawn, was exhilarating. And the walls of the corridor were coated by paintings of dangling willow-like branches. Hidden in the leaves, she saw bizarre images: disembodied heads being weighed in a balance, a ram being ridden by a monkey.

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". . . Officer Philmus. I hope you aren't too disconcerted by our decor."

She turned at the gravelly voice. A heavy-set, intense man of around fifty was walking toward her. He was dressed in subdued, plain black robes which swished a little as he moved. This was her contact: Monsignor Boyle, a high-up in the Vatican's Pontifical Academy of Science.

"Monsignor."

Boyle eyed the bizarre artwork. "The works here are five hundred years old. The artists, students of Raphael, were enthused by the rediscovery of part of Nero's palace." He sounded British, his tones measured and even. "You must forgive the Vatican its eccentricities."

"Eccentric or not, the Holy See is a state that has signed up to the UN's conventions on the creation, exploitation, and control of artificial sentience—"

"Which is why you are here." Boyle smiled. "Americans are always impatient. So. What do you know about Eva Himmelfarb?"

"She was a priest. A Jesuit. An expert in organic computing, who—"

"Eva Himmelfarb was a fine scholar, if undisciplined. She was pursuing her research—and, incidentally, working on a translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*—and suddenly she produced a book, *that* book, which has been making such an impact in theoretical physics. . . . And then, just as suddenly, she killed herself. Eva's text begins as a translation of the last canto of the *Paradiso*—"

"In which Dante sees God."

". . . Loosely speaking. And then the physical theory, expressed in such language and mathematics as Eva could evidently deploy, simply erupts."

Himmelfarb's bizarre, complex text had superseded string theory by modeling fundamental particles and forces as membranes moving in twenty-four-dimensional space. *Something like that, anyhow.* It was, according to the experts who were trying to figure it out, the foundation for a true unified theory of physics. And it seemed to have come out of nowhere.

Boyle was saying, "It is as if, tracking Dante's footsteps, Eva had been granted a vision."

"And that's why you resurrected her."

"Ah." The Monsignor nodded coolly. "You are an amateur psychoanalyst. You see in me the frustrated priest, trapped in the bureaucratic layers of the Vatican, striving to comprehend another's glimpse of God."

"I'm just a San Francisco cop, Monsignor."

"Well, I think you'll have to try harder than that, officer. Do you know *how* she killed herself?"

"Tell me."

"She rigged up a microwave chamber. She burned herself to death. She used such high temperatures that the very molecules that had composed her body, her brain, were destroyed; above three hundred degrees or so, you see, even amino acids break down. It was as if she was determined to leave not the slightest remnant of her physical or spiritual presence."

"But she didn't succeed. Thanks to you."

The fat Monsignor's eyes glittered. He clapped his hands.

Pixels, cubes of light, swirled in the air. They gathered briefly in a nest of concentric spheres, and then coalesced into a woman: thin, tall, white, thirty-ish, oddly serene for someone with a sparrow's build. Her eyes seemed bright. Like Boyle, she was wearing drab cleric's robes.

The Virtual of Eva Himmelfarb registered surprise to be here, to exist at all. She looked down at her hands, her robes, and Boyle. Then she smiled at Philmus. Her surface was slightly too flawless.

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Philmus found herself staring. This was one of the first generation of women to take holy orders. It was going to take some getting used to a world where Catholic priests could look like flight attendants.

Time to go to work, Philmus. "Do you know who you are?"

"I am Eva Himmelfarb. And, I suppose, I should have expected this." She was German; her accent was light, attractive.

"Do you remember—"

"What I did? Yes."

Philmus nodded. She said formally, "We can carry out full tests later, Monsignor Boyle, but I can see immediately that this projection is aware of us, of me, and is conscious of changes in her internal condition. She is self-aware."

"Which means I have broken the law," said Monsignor Boyle dryly.

"That's to be assessed." She said to Himmelfarb, "You understand that under international convention you have certain rights. You have the right to continued existence for an indefinite period in information space, if you wish it. You have the right to read-only interfaces with the prime world. . . . It is illegal to create full sentience—self-awareness—for frivolous purposes. I'm here to assess the motives of the Vatican in that regard."

"We have a valid question to pose," murmured the Monsignor, with a hint of steel in his voice.

"Why did I destroy myself?" Himmelfarb laughed. "You would think that the custodians of the true Church would rely on rather less literal means to divine a human soul, wouldn't you, officer, than to drag me back from Hell itself?—Oh, yes, Hell. I am a suicide. And so I am doomed to the seventh circle, where I will be reincarnated as a withered tree. Have you read your Dante, officer?"

Philmus had, in preparation for the case. She said, "I always hated poetry."

The Monsignor said softly, "Why did you commit this sin, Eva?"

Himmelfarb flexed her Virtual fingers, and her flesh broke up briefly into fine, cubic pixels. "May I show you?"

The Monsignor glanced at Philmus, who nodded.

The lights dimmed. Philmus felt sensors probe at her exposed flesh, glimpsed lasers scanning her face.

The five-hundred-year-old painted willow branches started to rustle, and from the foliage inhuman eyes glared at her.

Then the walls dissolved, and Philmus was standing on top of a mountain.

She staggered. She felt light on her feet, as if giddy.

She always hated Virtual transitions.

The Monsignor was moaning.

She was on the edge of some kind of forest. She turned, cautiously. She found herself looking down the terraced slope of a mountain. At the base was an ocean that lapped, empty, to the world's round edge. The sun was bright in her eyes.

A few meters down, a wall of fire burned.

The Monsignor walked with great shallow bounds. He moved with care and distaste; maybe donning a Virtual body was some kind of venial sin.

Himmelfarb smiled at Philmus. "Do you know where you are? You could walk through that wall of fire, and not harm a hair of your head." She reached up to a tree branch and plucked a leaf. It grew back instantly. "Our natural laws are suspended here, officer; like a piece of art, everything gives expression to God's intention."

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Boyle said bluntly, "You are in Eden, Officer Philmus, at the summit of Mount Purgatory. The last earthly place Dante visited before ascending into Heaven."

Eden?

The trees, looming, seemed to crowd around her. She couldn't identify any species. Though they had no enviroshields, none of the trees suffered any identifiable burning or blight.

She found herself cowering under the blank, unprotected sky.

Maybe this was *someone's* vision of Eden. But Philmus had been living under a Dome for ten years; this was no place she could ever be at peace.

"What happened to the gravity?"

Himmelfarb said, "Gravity diminishes as you ascend Purgatory. We are far from Satan here . . . I can't show you what I saw, Officer Philmus. But perhaps, if we look through Dante's eyes, you will understand. *The Divine Comedy* is a kind of science fiction story. It's a journey through the universe, as Dante saw it. He was guided by Virgil—of course you know who Virgil was—"

Of course she did. "Why don't you tell me?"

The Monsignor said, "The greatest Latin poet. You must have heard of the *Aeneid.* The significance to Dante was that Virgil was a pagan: he died before Christ was born. No matter how wise and just Virgil was, he could never ascend to Heaven, as Dante could, because he never knew Christ."

"Seems harsh."

The Monsignor managed a grin. "Dante wasn't making the rules."

Himmelfarb said, "Dante reaches Satan in Hell, at the center of the Earth. Then, with Virgil, he climbs a tunnel to a mountain in the southern hemisphere—"

"This one."

"Yes." Himmelfarb shielded her eyes. "The *Paradiso,* the last book, starts here. And it was when my translation reached this point that the thing I'd put in my head woke up."

"What are you talking about?"

The priest grinned like a teenager. "Let me show you my laboratory. Come on." And she turned and plunged into the forest.

Irritated, Philmus followed.

In the mouth of the wood, it was dark. The ground, coated with leaves and mulch, gave uncomfortably under her feet.

The Monsignor walked with her. He said, "Dante was a study assignment. Eva was a Jesuit, officer. Her science was unquestioned in its quality. But her faith was weak."

Himmelfarb looked back. "So there you have your answer, Monsignor," she called. "I am the priest who lost her faith, and destroyed herself." She spread her hands. "Why not release me now?"

Boyle ignored her.

The light was changing.

The mulch under Philmus's feet had turned, unnoticed, to a thick carpet. And the leaves on the trees had mutated to the pages of books, immense rows of them.

They broke through into a rambling library.

Himmelfarb laughed. "Welcome to the Secret Archive of the Vatican, Officer Philmus."

They walked through the Archive.

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Readers, mostly in lay clothes, were scattered sparsely around the rooms, with Virtual documents glittering in the air before them, page images turning without rustling.

Philmus felt like a tourist.

Himmelfarb spun in the air. "A fascinating place," she said to Philmus. "Here you will find a demand for homage to Genghis Khan, and Galileo's recantation. . . . After two thousand years I doubt that anybody knows all the secrets stored here."

Philmus glanced at Boyle, but his face was impassive.

Himmelfarb went on, "This is also the heart of the Vatican's science effort. It may seem paradoxical to you that there is not necessarily a conflict between the scientific world-view and the Christian. In Dante's Aristotelian universe, the Earth is the physical center of all things, but God is the spiritual center. Just as human nature has twin poles, of rationality and dreams. Dante's universe, the product of a thousand years of contemplation, was a model of how these poles could be united; in our time this seems impossible, but perhaps after another millennium of meditation on the meaning of our own new physics, we might come a little closer. What do you think?"

Philmus shrugged. "I'm no Catholic."

"But," said Himmelfarb, "you are troubled by metaphysics. The state of my electronic soul, for instance. You have more in common with me than you imagine, officer."

They reached a heavy steel door. Beyond it was a small, glass-walled vestibule; there were sinks, pegs, and lockers. And beyond that lay a laboratory, stainless-steel benches under the grey glow of fluorescent lights. The lab looked uncomfortably sharp-edged by contrast with the building that contained it.

With confidence, Himmelfarb turned and walked through the glass wall into the lab. Philmus followed. The wall was a soap-bubble membrane that stretched over her face, then parted softly, its edge stroking her skin.

Much of the equipment was anonymous lab stuff—rows of grey boxes—incomprehensible to Philmus. The air was warm, the only smell an antiseptic subtext.

They reached a glass wall that reached to the ceiling. Black glove sleeves, empty, protruded from the wall like questing fingers. Beyond the wall was an array of tiny vials, with little robotic manipulators wielding pipettes, heaters and stirrers running on tracks around them. If the array was as deep as it was broad, Philmus thought, there must be millions of the little tubes in there.

Himmelfarb stood before the wall. "My pride and joy," she said dryly. "Or it would be if pride weren't a sin. The future of information processing, officer, perhaps of consciousness itself. . . ."

"And all of it," said the Monsignor, "inordinately expensive. All those enzymes, you know."

"It looks like a DNA computer," Philmus said.

"Exactly right," Himmelfarb said. "The first experiments date back to the last century. Did you know that? The principle is simple. DNA strands, or fragments of strands, will spontaneously link in ways that can be used to model real-world problems. We might model your journey to Rome, officer, from—"

"San Francisco."

The air filled with cartoons, twisting molecular spirals.

"I would prepare strands of DNA, twenty or more nucleotide bases long, each of which would represent a possible transit point on your journey—Los

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Angeles, New York, London, Paris—or one of the possible paths between them."

The strands mingled, and linked into larger molecules, evidently modeling the routes Philmus could follow.

"The processing and storage capacity of such machines is huge. In a few grams of DNA I would have quadrillions of solution molecules—"

"And somewhere in there you'd find a molecule representing my best journey."

"And there's the rub. I have to *find* the single molecule that contains the answer I seek. And that can take seconds, an eternity compared to the fastest silicon-based machines." The cartoons evaporated. Himmelfarb pushed her Virtual hand through the wall and ran her fingers through the arrays of tubes, lovingly. "At any rate, that is the challenge."

Monsignor Boyle said, "We—that is, the Pontifical Academy—funded Eva's research into the native information processing potential of human DNA."

"Native?"

Abruptly the lab, the wall of vials, crumbled and disappeared; a hail of pixels evaporated, exposing the Edenic forest once more.

Philmus winced in the sunlight. *What now?* She felt disoriented, weary from the effort of trying to track Himmelfarb's grasshopper mind.

Himmelfarb smiled and held out her hand to Philmus. "Let me show you what I learned from my study of Dante." The young priest's Virtual touch was too smooth, too cool, like plastic.

The Monsignor seemed to be moaning again. Or perhaps he was praying.

"*Look at the sun,*" said Himmelfarb.

Philmus lifted her face, and stared into the sun, which was suspended high above Eden's trees. She forced her eyes open.

It wasn't real light. It carried none of the heat and subtle weight of sunlight. But the glare filled her head.

She saw Himmelfarb; she looked as if she was haloed.

Then she looked down.

They were rising, as if in some glass-walled elevator.

They were already above the treetops. She felt no breeze; it was as if a cocoon of air moved with them. She felt light, insubstantial, like a child in the arms of her father. She felt oddly safe; she would come to no harm here.

"We're accelerating," Himmelfarb said. "If you want the Aristotelian physics of it, we're being attracted to the second pole of the universe."

"The second pole?"

"God."

Looking back, Philmus could see the Earth, heavy and massive and unmoving, at the center of everything, a ball of water folded over on itself. They were already so high she couldn't make out Purgatory.

Rising ever faster, they passed through a layer of glassy light, like an airplane climbing through cloud. As they climbed higher, she saw how the layer of light folded over the planet, shimmering like an immense soap bubble. Embedded in the membrane, she could see a rocky ball, like a lumpy cloud, below them and receding.

It was the Moon.

She said, "If I remember my Ptolemy—"

"The Earth is surrounded by spheres. Nine of them, nine heavens. They are transparent, and they carry the sun, Moon, and planets, beneath the fixed stars."

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The Monsignor murmured, "We are already beyond the sphere of decay and death."

Himmelfarb laughed. "And you ain't seen nothing yet."

Still they accelerated.

Himmelfarb's eyes were glowing brilliantly bright. She said, "You must understand Dante's geometrical vision. Think of a globe of Earth, Satan at the south pole, God at the north. Imagine moving north, away from Satan. The circles of Hell, and now the spheres of Heaven, are like the lines of latitude you cross as you head to the equator. . . ."

Philmus, breathless, tried not to close her eyes. "You were telling me about your research."

". . . All right. DNA is a powerful information store. A pictogram of your own DNA, officer, is sufficient to specify how to manufacture you—and everything you've inherited from all your ancestors, right back to the primordial sea. But there is still much about our DNA—whole stretches of its structure—whose purpose we can only guess. I wondered if—"

The Monsignor blew out his cheeks. "All this is unverified."

Himmelfarb said, "I wondered if human DNA *itself* might contain information-processing mechanisms—which we might learn from or even exploit, to replace our clumsy pseudo-mechanical methods. . . ."

Still they rose, through another soap-bubble celestial sphere, then another. All the planets, Mercury through Saturn, were below them now. The Earth, at the center of translucent, deep-blue clockwork, was far below.

They reached the sphere of the fixed stars. Philmus swept up through a curtain of light points, which then spangled over the diminishing Earth beneath her.

"One hell of a sight," Philmus said.

"Literally," said the Monsignor, gasping.

"You see," Himmelfarb said to Philmus, "*I succeeded.* I found computation—information processing—going on in the junk DNA. And more. I found evidence that assemblages of DNA within our cells have receptors, so they can observe the external world in some form, that they store and process data, and even that they are self-referential."

"Natural DNA computers?"

"More than that. These assemblages are aware of their own existence, officer. They *think.*"

Suspended in the air, disoriented, Philmus held up her free hand. "Whoa! Are you telling me our cells are *sentient?*"

"Not the cells," the priest said patiently. "Organelles, assemblages of macromolecules *inside* the cells. The *organelles* are—"

"Dreaming?"

The priest smiled. "You *do* understand!"

Philmus shivered, and looked down at her hand. Could this be true? "I feel as if I've woken up in a haunted house."

"Except that, with your network of fizzing neurons, your clumsily constructed meta-consciousness, *you* are the ghost."

"How come nobody before ever noticed such a fundamental aspect of our DNA?"

Himmelfarb shrugged. "We weren't looking. And besides, the basic purpose of human DNA is construction. Its sequences of nucleotides are job orders and blueprints for making molecular machine tools. Proteins, built by DNA, built you, officer, who learned, fortuitously, to think, and question your ori-

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gins." She winked at Philmus. "Here is a prediction. In environments where resources for building, for growing, are scarce—the deep sea vents, or even the volcanic seams of Mars where life might be clinging, trapped by five billion years of ice—we will find much stronger evidence of macromolecular sentience. Rocky dreams on Mars, officer!"

The Monsignor said dryly, "If we ever get to Mars we can check that. And if you'd bothered to write up your progress in an orderly manner we might have a way to verify your conclusions."

The dead priest smiled indulgently. "I am not—was not—a very good reductionist, I am afraid. In my arrogance, officer, I took the step that has damned me."

"Which was?"

Her face was open, youthful, too smooth. "Studying minds in test tubes wasn't enough. *I wanted to contact the latent consciousness embedded in my own DNA.* I was curious. I wanted to share its oceanic dream. I injected myself with a solution consisting of a buffer solution and certain receptor mechanisms that—"

"And did it work?"

She smiled. "Does it matter? Perhaps now you have your answer, Monsignor. I am Faust; I am Frankenstein. I even have the right accent! I am the obsessed scientist, driven by her greed for godless knowledge, who allowed her own creation to destroy her. There is your story—"

Philmus said, "I'll decide that. . . . Eva, what did it feel like?"

Himmelfarb hesitated, and her face clouded with pixels. "Frustrating. Like inspecting a wonderful landscape through a pinhole. The organelles operate at a deep, fundamental level. . . . And perhaps they enjoy a continuous consciousness that reaches back to their formation in the primeval sea five billion years ago. Think of that. They are part of the universe as I can never be, behind the misty walls of my senses; they know the universe as I never could. All I could do—like Dante—is interpret their vision with my own limited language and mathematics."

So here's where Dante fits in. "You're saying *Dante* went through this experience?"

"It was the source of the *Comedy*. Yes."

"But Dante was not injected with receptors. How could he—"

"But we all share the deeper mystery, the DNA molecule itself. Perhaps in some of us it awakens naturally, as I forced it into my own body. . . . And now, I will show you the central mystery of Dante's vision."

Boyle said, "I think we're slowing."

Himmelfarb said, "We're approaching the ninth sphere."

"The Primum Mobile," said the Monsignor.

"Yes. The first moving part, the root of time and space. Turned by angels, expressing their love for God. . . . Look up," Himmelfarb said to Philmus. "What do you see?"

At first, only structureless light. But then, a texture . . .

Suddenly Philmus was looking, up beyond the Primum Mobile, into another glass onion, a nesting of transparent spheres that surrounded—not a dull lump of clay like Earth—but a brilliant point of light. The nearest spheres were huge, like curving wings, as large as the spheres of the outer planets.

Himmelfarb said, "They are the spheres of the angels, which surround the universe's other pole, which is God. Like a mirror image of Hell. Counting out from here we have the angels, archangels, principalities, powers—"

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"I don't get it," Philmus said. "*What* other pole? How can a sphere have two centers?"

"Think about the equator," whispered Himmelfarb. "The globe of Earth, remember? As you travel north, as you pass the equator, the concentric circles of latitude start to grow smaller, while still enclosing those to the south. . . ."

"We aren't on the surface of a globe."

"*But we are on the surface of a 3-sphere—the three-dimensional surface of a four-dimensional hypersphere.* Do you see? The concentric spheres you see are exactly analogous to the lines of latitude on the two-dimensional surface of a globe. And just as, if you stand on the equator of Earth, you can look back to the south pole or forward to the north pole, so here, at the universe's equator, we can look toward the poles of Earth or God. The Primum Mobile, the equator of the universe, curves around the Earth, below us, and at the same time it curves around God, above us."

Philmus looked back and forth, from God to Earth, and she saw, incredibly, that Himmelfarb was right. The Primum Mobile curved two ways at once.

The Monsignor's jaw seemed to be hanging open. "And Dante saw this? A four-dimensional artifact? He *described* it?"

"As remarkable as it seems—yes," said Himmelfarb. "Read the poem if you don't believe me: around the year 1320, Dante Alighieri wrote down a precise description of the experience of traveling through a 3-sphere. When I figured this out, I couldn't believe it myself. It was like finding a revolver in a layer of dinosaur fossils."

Philmus said, "But how is it possible. . . ?"

"*It was not Dante,*" Himmelfarb said. "It was the sentient organelles *within* him who had the true vision, which Dante interpreted in terms of his medieval cosmology. We know he had wrestled with the paradox that he lived in a universe that was simultaneously centered on Earth, and on God. . . . This offered him a geometric resolution. It is a fantastic hypothesis, but it does explain how four-dimensional geometry, unexplored by the mathematicians until the nineteenth century, found expression in a poem of the early Renaissance." She grinned, mischievously. "Or perhaps Dante was a time traveler. What do you think?"

The Monsignor growled, "Are we done?"

". . . You know we aren't," Himmelfarb said gently.

Philmus felt overwhelmed; she longed to return to solid ground. "After this, what else can there be?"

"The last canto," the Monsignor whispered.

Himmelfarb said, "Yes. The last canto, which defeated even Dante. But, seven centuries later, I was able to go further."

Philmus stared into her glowing eyes. "Tell us."

And the three of them, like birds hovering beneath the domed roof of a cathedral, ascended into the Empyrean.

They passed into a layer of darkness, like a storm cloud.

The hemispheres of the 3-sphere—the Earth and its nested spheres, the globes of the angels—faded like stars at dawn. But Himmelfarb's eyes glowed brightly.

And then, space folded away.

Philmus could still see Boyle, Himmelfarb, the priest's shining eyes. But she couldn't tell how near or far the others were. And when she tried to look away from them, her eyes slid over an elusive darkness, deeper than the darkness inside her own skull.

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There was no structure beyond the three of them, their relative positions. She felt as small as an electron, as huge as a galaxy. She felt lost.

She clung to Himmelfarb's hand. "Where are we? How far—"

"We are outside the Primum Mobile: beyond duration, beyond the structure of space. Dante understood this place. 'There near and far neither add nor subtract. . . .' You know, we underestimate Dante. The physicists are the worst. They see us all running around as Virtuals in the memory of some giant computer of the future. Not to mention the science fiction writers. Garbage. Dante understood that a soul is not a Virtual, and in the *Paradiso,* he was trying to express the transhuman experience of true eternity—"

"*What did he see?*"

Himmelfarb smiled. "Watch."

. . . Philmus saw light, like the image of God at the center of the angels' spheres. It was a point, and yet it filled space and time. And then it unfolded, like a flower blooming, with particles and lines (*world lines? quantum functions?*) billowing out and rushing past her face, in an insubstantial breeze. Some of the lines tangled, and consciousness sparked—trapped in time, briefly shouting its joy at its moment of awareness—before dissipating once more. But still the unfolding continued, in a fourth, fifth, sixth direction, in ways she could somehow, if briefly, conceive.

She felt a surge of joy. And there was something more, something just beyond her grasp—

It was gone. She was suspended in the structureless void again. Himmelfarb grasped her hand.

Boyle was curled over on himself, his eyes clamped closed.

Philmus said, "I saw—"

Himmelfarb said, "It doesn't matter. We all see something different. And besides, it was only a Virtual shadow. . . . What did you *feel?*"

Philmus hesitated. "As I do when I solve a case. When the pieces come together."

Himmelfarb nodded. "Cognition. Scientists understand that. The ultimate cognition, knowing reality."

"But now it's gone." She felt desolate.

"I know." Himmelfarb's grip tightened. "I'm sorry."

The Monsignor, his voice weak, murmured, "'I saw gathered . . . / Bound up by love in a single volume / All the leaves scattered through the universe; / Substance and accidents and their relations, / But yet fused together in such a manner / That what I am talking about is a simple light . . .'"

"Dante was very precise about how he interpreted what he saw," said Himmelfarb. "This is Aristotelian physics. 'Substances' and 'accidents' describe phenomena and their relationships. I believe that *Dante was trying to describe a glimpse of the unification of nature.*"

"Yes," Philmus whispered.

"And then he saw a paradox that he expresses by an image. Three circles, superimposed, of the same size—and yet of different colors."

"Separated by a higher dimension," Philmus guessed.

"Yes. In the high-dimensional artifact, Dante saw a metaphor for the Trinity. God's three personalities in one being."

"Ah," said the Monsignor, cautiously uncurling. "But *you* saw—"

"Rather more. I knew enough physics—"

"This is the basis of the new unified theory," Philmus said. "A unification of phenomena through the structure of a higher-dimensional space."

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Himmelfarb's face was turning to pixels again. "It isn't as simple as that," she said. "The whole notion of dimensionality is an approximate one that only emerges in a semi-classical context—Well. I don't suppose it matters now. I wrote it down as fast as I could, as far as I could remember it, as best I could express it. I don't think I could give any more."

The Monsignor looked disappointed.

Philmus said, "And then—"

"I killed myself," Himmelfarb said bluntly. Bathed in sourceless light, she seemed to withdraw from Philmus. "You have to understand. *It wasn't me.* I had hoped to find enlightenment. But *I* was not enhanced. It was the *organelles'* vision that leaked into my soul, and which I glimpsed."

"And that was what you could not bear," the Monsignor said. Hanging like a toy in mid-air, he nodded complacently; evidently, Philmus thought, he had learned what he had come to find, and Himmelfarb's essential untidiness—so distressing to Boyle's bureaucrat's heart—was gone. Now she was safely dead, her story closed.

Philmus thought that over, and decided she would prosecute.

But she also sensed that Boyle knew more than he was telling her. And besides . . . "I think you're wrong, Monsignor."

Boyle raised his eyebrows. Himmelfarb hovered between them, saying nothing.

"Eva didn't quite finish showing us the last canto. Did you?"

The priest closed her eyes. "After the vision of the multidimensional circle, Dante says: 'That circle . . . / When my eyes examined it rather more / Within itself, and in its own color, / Seemed to be painted with our effigy . . .'"

"I don't understand," the Monsignor admitted.

Philmus said, "Dante saw a human face projected on his multi-dimensional artifact. He interpreted whatever he saw as the Incarnation: the embodiment of God—beyond time and space—in our time-bound mortal form. The final paradox of your Christian theology."

Boyle said, "So the ultimate vision of the universe is ourselves."

"No," Himmelfarb snapped. "Today we would say that we—all minds—*are* the universe, which calls itself into existence through our observation of it."

"Ah." Boyle nodded. "Mind is the 'eternal light, existing in ourselves alone, / Alone knowing ourselves . . .' I paraphrase. And this is what you saw, Eva?"

"No," said Philmus. She felt impatient; this insensitive asshole was supposed to be a priest, after all. "Don't you see? This is what Himmelfarb believed her *passengers,* the sentient organelles, would see next; she had the guidance from Dante's sketchy report for that. And that's what she wanted to prevent."

"Yes." Himmelfarb smiled distantly. "You are perceptive, officer. Are you sure you aren't a Catholic?"

"Not even lapsed."

Himmelfarb said, "You see, Dante's quest did not end with discovering an answer, but with the end of questioning. He submitted himself to the order of the universe, so that his 'desire and will / Were . . . turned like a wheel, all at one speed, / By the love which moves the sun and the other stars.'"

Philmus said, "And that was the peace the organelles achieved, the peace you glimpsed. But you knew, or feared, you couldn't follow."

"And so," said Boyle, "you destroyed yourself—"

"To destroy *them.* Yes." Her expression was bitter. "Do you understand now, Monsignor? Of course, this is the end of your religion—of all religion. We are accidental structures, evanescent, tied to time and doomed to obliv-

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ion. All our religious impulse, all our questing, all our visions—just a pale shadow of the organelles' direct experience. *They* have God, Monsignor. All we have are Dante dreams."

Philmus said, "You were happy to be Dante. But—"

"But I refused to see them go where I couldn't follow. Yes, I could be Dante. But I couldn't bear to be Virgil."

"I absolve you of your sin," the Monsignor said abruptly, and he blessed Himmelfarb with a cross, shaped by his right hand.

Himmelfarb looked shocked—and then an expression of peace crossed her face, before light burst from within her, dazzling Philmus.

When her eyes recovered, Philmus was embedded in space and time once more: alone with the Monsignor, in the sixteenth century corridor, where the willow branches were merely painted.

Philmus met the Monsignor one more time, at the conclusion of the hearing in the New York UN building. The UN Commission had found against the Vatican, which would have to pay a significant fine.

Boyle greeted Philmus civilly. "So our business is done."

"Do you feel we reached the truth, Monsignor?"

He hesitated. "I don't know what to believe. The analysis of Eva's monograph is continuing. The NASA people have taken up her suggestion of alternate evolutionary directions for macromolecules on Mars, and the exobiologists are modeling and proposing missions. We haven't been able to recreate Eva's lab results: to retrace her 'footprints in Hell,' as Dante would say. Perhaps it was all a fever dream of Eva's, brought on by overwork and too much study. It wouldn't be the first such incident in the Church's long history." He paused thoughtfully.

"Or perhaps we are indeed hosts to another sentience. Perhaps, one day, it will awaken fully. If it does, I hope it will treat us with compassion. And what do *you* believe, Officer Philmus?"

I believe that whatever the Vatican finds, whatever it knows, it will keep to itself, in the Secret Archive.

"I'm reading Dante." It was true.

The Monsignor smiled. "But you hate poetry."

"It's the only place I can think of where I might find the answers. Anyhow, it's something to do in the small hours of the night. Better than—"

He said softly, "Yes?"

"Better than to lie there listening to my body. Wondering who else is home."

He whispered, "Dante dreams? You too?"

"Monsignor—you realize that if Eva was right, she achieved first contact."

His face was calculating, but not without sympathy. "The Vatican is very old, officer. Old, and secretive. And—though without the tools of modern science—we have been investigating these issues for a very long time."

She felt her pulse hammer. "What does that mean?"

"There are many ways to God. Perhaps Eva indeed made contact. But—the *first?*"

He smiled, turned, and walked away. ○

Author's note: A reference to Dante's 4-dimensional geometry can be found in "Dante and the 3-sphere," Mark Peterson, American Journal of Physics *vol. 47, pp. 1031-1035, 1979.*

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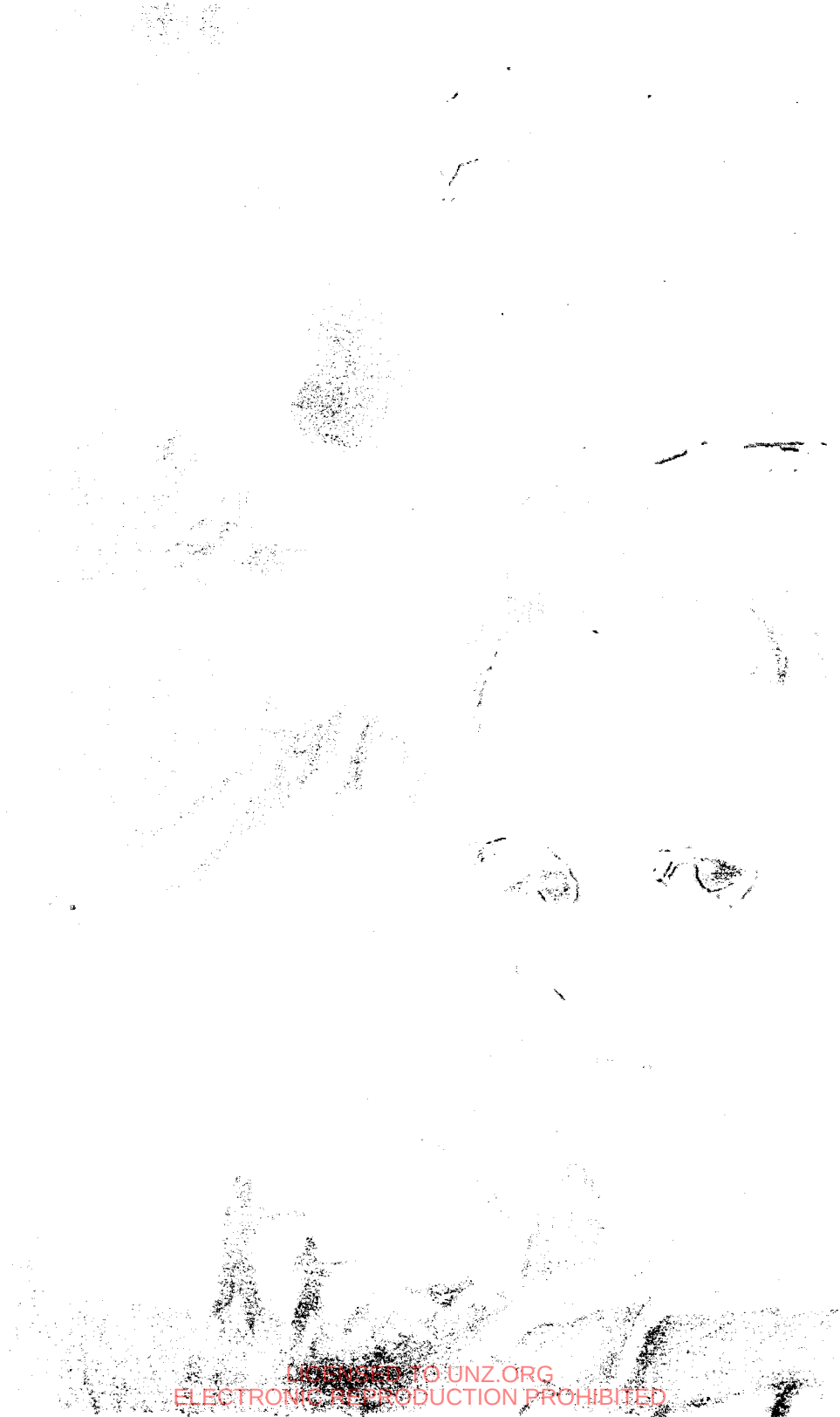
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Robert Reed

SAVIOR

The author recently sold a collection of short stories to Golden Gryphon Press. Those tales that first appeared in *Asimov's* include: "The Utility Man" (November 1990), "Stride" (November 1994), "Waging Good" (January 1995), "Decency" (June 1996), and "Chrysalis" (September 1996). "Chrysalis" was also a recent finalist for this year's Nebula award.

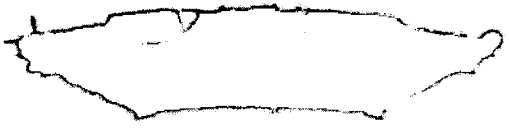

Illustration by Darryl Elliott

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Grandpa showed up early. I was still in bed, still hard asleep. And Mom pulled at my arm, telling me, "Get up, darling." But I couldn't make myself. I was too tired. Grandpa was standing in the door. I'm pretty sure of that. Mom asked if this was a good thing, considering. Mom said, "Considering," more than once. But Grandpa didn't say one word. Then I was sitting up, halfway awake, and she told me, "Your clothes are laid out. Go on, honey." And they let me dress alone in the dark.

My shirts and pants were new and warm and comfortably scratchy. But my boots were leftover from last year. Even though they'd grown out as far as they could, and even though my toes felt cramped up inside them, I liked them. And I liked my hunting vest, even though it was too big and heavy. It was Grandpa's once. I liked its dirty orange color and its old smells. And whenever I put it on, before it got too heavy for me, I liked how it felt. With all those shells stuck into its little elastic pockets, I felt like a soldier. I felt dangerous and safe wrapped up inside all that ammunition.

Both of them were waiting in the kitchen. Grandpa was talking until he heard me. He looked up and smiled and said, "Ready?"

Mom was crying. Not like last night, but she was wiping at her face and smiling at me, her eyes red and ugly. "You two have fun today," she said. As if it was an order. Then she gave Grandpa a big hug and me a wet kiss, then tried to kiss me again. But I slipped outside before she could.

Grandpa always bought himself a new truck for Opening Day.

That year's truck was parked between our houses, already running and every light burning. We climbed in, and I said, "Hi, Solomon."

Solomon was standing on the back seat, watching everything with happy yellow eyes. "Hello, Sammy," he said. "Bird day, bird day, bird day—!"

Grandpa said, "Quiet."

Solomon was a retriever-techie mix. His dog brain had a chip add-on, and there was a voice box stuck in his neck. The box made him sound like a little kid. Except he was an old dog. And I liked him, sort of. Even if we weren't friends, exactly. Dogs can be awfully jealous, and we never liked sharing Grandpa with one another.

We rolled down the long drive and past Grandpa's house, then through the first tall black gate. I waved at the night guards. There were a dozen of them, maybe more. The main road went past all those cameras and reporters. Grandpa took us out the back road to the slickway, then let the truck drive. I started to feel the warm seat under me, and I sat back and shut my eyes, and it wasn't until the dog said, "Birds," that I was awake again.

"I smell birds," said that kid's voice. "I smell birds!"

We had turned off the slickway. Grandpa was driving again, steering us down a road that looked like two paths running through the tall brown grass. I heard the grass slipping under us. The sun wasn't up. Except for a little glow past a line of trees, there wasn't anything that looked like a sunrise. I pulled myself up and coughed, then asked, "How soon?"

"Soon," said the dog. "Soon, soon."

The television was on. The news was playing with the sound turned down low. When Grandpa's face appeared on the little screen, Grandpa turned it off. Then he let the truck roll to a stop, and there was nothing to hear but warm air blowing from the vents. I felt the heat on my bare face and in my crammed-together toes. Looking out the window, I knew it was cold. Even for November. And I knew that I was comfortable here, and happy enough, and did we have to walk through these cold dark fields?

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I asked the question in my head. Nowhere else.

Grandpa hadn't said one word. He usually liked to tell me our plans and ask how I was feeling, and he'd remind me how I needed to be careful all the time. Hunting wasn't a game. But when he wouldn't talk, I asked, "When does it get light?"

He said nothing.

I looked at him and saw him looking at me. Only he wasn't. Mom always told me that he had a kindly face, and maybe I knew what she meant. But something about those old eyes made me squirm. Just for that moment.

Then he patted me on the knee, saying, "Soon."

It's what the dog had said, only Grandpa's voice was old and tired and he didn't sound as if he meant it.

My gun was my grandfather's when he was a boy. He gave it to me, even though we kept it at his house where he could keep it clean for me. I always liked its weight when I first picked it up, and I loved the slick sharp sounds it made when I loaded it. The black barrel was always cold to touch. The wood parts were decorated with checkerboards where your hands held tight, and the butt was padded with thick pink rubber. Where Grandpa's guns were fancy and new, mine was simple. It didn't have any videocam or adjustable shells. I shot old-fashioned shells. Plastic and brass and nickel-iron shot. The only new trick was the strapped on safety that kept me from accidentally shooting at people or myself.

The safety told me, "I am on the job."

Solomon whispered, "This way, hurry. This way."

"Wait," Grandpa told him.

But the dog kept going, his old hips fighting to keep up.

"He didn't hear you," I ventured.

"No, he hears," he said. "He just pretends to be deaf."

The sun was coming up, finally. But the sky in front of us was still dark, full of stars and the low stations and the big geosynchronous cities. I looked up, and maybe I was watching for the starship. And maybe Grandpa saw me looking. Because he took me by the shoulder, saying nothing. Just sort of steering me toward the field.

All sorts of crops had been growing on that ground. The harvesters had left their marks, tilling up the black ground as they passed. Here and there were masses of green leaves. Some cold-happy tailored vegetable was mixed in with the dead stalks and empty steak pods and the dried up melon vines. Just walking in that field was work. My gun and vest and boots were getting heavy. Even if I was bigger than last year, and stronger, I'd forgotten, like I always forgot, how much it hurt to pull your feet through those tangled vines.

"Slow," said Grandpa. To the dog.

The sun eased its way over the horizon. I turned and looked back at it and at the new truck, squinting hard.

Grandpa said, "Pay attention."

To me.

The dog had stopped in front of a mound of brown stalks. Sniffing hard. Was it pheasants? Or quail? Or one of the tailored species? I was hoping for something big and fancy. A screamer, or even a flashbird. Stepping closer, I lifted my gun up to my shoulder, and that's when Solomon started to growl, the black fur on his neck standing up straight, and his old body leaping inside the mound.

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"Get back here!" Grandpa yelled.

Suddenly there was this wild growling.

"Come!" Grandpa screamed. "Come here!"

And the growling turned to squealing. Solomon practically flew out of there, his head down and his eyes almost shut. He went straight toward the first person that he saw. Which was me. And I smelled him exactly when Grandpa said, "Shit!"

Said, "Skunk!"

It wasn't just a smell. The stink that you smell on the slickway, that hangs around a dead skunk, is nothing compared to the juices that come out of a living animal. It's like getting hit in the nose with a hockey stick. You feel it as much as you smell it, and it makes you sick. That's why I turned and tried to run.

Grandpa was shouting, "Stop!"

He said, "Heel!"

He said, "Son-of-a-bitch!" and began firing. *Boom. Boom.* And I turned, watching him aiming square at the mound. At the skunk. *Boom. Boom.* And *boom.*

I'd never seen Grandpa that way. In the low bright light, he looked almost young, his face full of color and his eyes big and his gloved hands shoving in another five shells, every move slick and smooth. Then he aimed again, this time at the sky, and he fired off all five shots before he felt done.

Solomon was rolling in the stalks and vines, fighting to get rid of the stink.

I just stood there, feeling useless and sad.

Grandpa lowered his gun, then said, "Back to the truck, boys. Now."

Solomon was saying, "Shit, shit, shit, shit!"

I looked at the sky, up where Grandpa had been shooting, and that's when I saw the starship hanging there. Big as a big coin held at arm's length, and the same color as a coin, but square-looking, with shadows filling up the nozzles of its huge, dead engines.

The farmhouse was an old house.

The farmer was an old man who didn't have any hair on his head, or anywhere. He looked at us through his storm door, then said, "Oh," with a quiet little voice. His eyes couldn't have been any bigger.

Grandpa said, "Mr. Teeson? My people talked to you this summer. About giving me permission to go hunting on your land?"

"I remember that, sir. Absolutely."

Solomon was in the yard, panting. Grandpa had gotten here by driving slowly, letting the dog chase us all the way.

Mr. Teeson opened his door and stepped out, and he said, "Colonel Sattis." He said, "I can't believe this . . . Jesus. . . !"

Grandpa said, "Damned skunks."

"May I?" The farmer stuck out his hand, saying, "It's an honor."

Grandpa seemed surprised, maybe even bothered. But he managed to say, "The honor's mine." He always said those words, and he always wiped both hands against his shirt before offering one of them. Then he sort of smiled and shook the farmer's hand, asking, "Is there any way you might help? My stupid old dog ran into a skunk."

Mr. Teeson wrinkled up his nose and said, "I kind of figured that."

Then both men laughed. And Grandpa seemed more relaxed, saying, "This is my grandson. Sam, this is Mr. Teeson."

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The farmer looked at me and said, "Hello, son."

I said, "Sir."

Then he winked at me, saying, "You know, I've admired your grandfather forever. I want you to know that."

Grandpa said, "Thank you."

"I had a cousin who was in the Service with you, sir."

"Perhaps I know him." Grandpa was being polite, or interested. I couldn't tell which. "In Alpha Division, perhaps?"

"No. He was a lieutenant in Beta Division."

Alpha was my grandfather's unit. Most of them lived, and all of the Betas died.

But the farmer didn't seem too sad, hunching over to explain, "Your grandpa's a great man. Did you know that?"

The man had awful breath. I swallowed and said, "I know, sir."

"I bet you do." He looked at Grandpa again. "A fine boy."

"The best."

Solomon gave a big complaining howl.

The farmer shook his head and started back into his house. "I don't have any of that new skunk-gunk, Colonel. But I keep something almost as good."

Grandpa said, "Thank you. So much."

We waited on the porch. I could hear a television. I couldn't make out what was being said, but it sounded like the news. It sounded important and angry, and I looked at Grandpa for a moment, then realized that he was deafer than his dog.

The farmer came back smiling, carrying a couple of tall cans of tomato juice. When he saw my look, he winked and said, "This is the best cure we had for a lot of years, son."

"I hate that stuff," I told him. "Do we have to drink it?"

That made both men laugh. But Grandpa's laugh was louder than normal, and the sound of it was wrong somehow.

I kept my distance, watching. Grandpa got the dog by his neck. Solomon was moaning, saying, "Shit," over and over again until Grandpa said, "That's enough!" Then the farmer led us around back, and he actually held the dog while Grandpa peeled off his shirts and boots and finally his pants. It was still very cold outside, and just seeing him made me shiver. Grandpa took the dog back and said, "Okay." The farmer opened the first can, and Grandpa poured it on the thick black fur, working it in as if it was soap. He was holding the dog by the loose skin of the neck, and Solomon twisted and kicked, and Grandpa was soon covered with the juice, and Solomon howled and complained and shook himself half-dry, little splashes of tomato juice sprinkled over both men.

I was glad not to be helping.

But I began to feel guilty, not having anything important to do.

The farmer opened the second can, laughing hard about something. Out of guilt, I asked if there was anything I should do, and he wiped his dirty face with a dirtier arm, telling me, "I don't think so, Sam." Then he said, "Colonel Sattis," with a big, crisp voice. "The boy looks sort of cold."

Just in my toes and fingers, I thought.

But I didn't say a word.

I'd never seen Grandpa look that messy. He was the kind of person who wants his hair just so, even if there wasn't much of it. He liked nice clothes, and he always tried to look younger than he was. But there he was, wearing nothing except underwear and the sticky juice. I could see his pale belly

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hanging forward, his arms smooth and soft. And the smooth skin of his body made his face look more wrinkly than ever, and tired, even when he tried very hard to smile.

He said, "Sam. Why don't you go sit in the car then."

"No, you don't." The farmer waved at me, saying, "We won't be much longer. Wait inside my house, if you want."

"He smells," Grandpa promised.

"Who doesn't?" Mr. Teeson was the only one laughing, telling me, "Just stay off the furniture. All right, Sam?"

I felt like a coward, and I felt relieved.

I walked back around and through the front door, sitting on the floor, Indian-style. They were showing the same digital on the old-fashioned TV. Again. And since nobody was there to tell me not to watch, I decided not to change networks.

I decided to see it through. For once.

The humongous king was wearing nothing but a thin web of black wires, and it was hanging in the air, face-down. Its body was pink and hairless, and I don't care what some people say, it looked gross. It was huge and ugly, its thick legs kicking and its hands trying to grab one another, fingers big as my forearm curling and uncurling, the thin pink blood flowing from where the wires bit tight, then dripping fast to the glass floor.

Soldiers were walking under the alien.

Someone asked, "What next?" and another person—a woman—shouted, "Delta team's still trying to dock! And Beta isn't reporting!"

"Earth status?" said a nearby voice. A voice I knew.

The woman said, "Status unchanged, sir."

Someone else said, "Colonel." Then, "Nantucket's underwater now, sir."

The Colonel stepped into view. Not knowing that an alien camera was buried in the thick glass wall, he said, "Fuck," with that strong voice. He looked mostly the same, except the hair was thick and brown, and the face was smoother. He was a handsome man, and that's not me saying it. My history book called him, "The handsome colonel from the nation's heartland."

He said, "Fuck," a second time, his breath hanging in the cold air. "What about Beta?"

"No news. Sir."

Beta Division had tried to attack the weapons arrays, which was suicide. I read that in my history books, too. Most of them were cooked by the radiation before they even got to their targets. Which was probably what happened to Mr. Teeson's poor cousin.

I felt a good little dose of anger.

"Okay," said Colonel Sattis. "Thank you."

Then he picked up a fat alien microphone, using both hands where the king would hold it with one. "No more patience," he said. "I'm too fucking tired."

What he said went into a gray box, and the box spoke to the humongous in its own rumbling language.

The humongous answered, and the box translated it as, "It is not we! We are blameless, friend!"

"Quiet," said the Colonel. He sighed and said, "We've already been here. You *claim* that some faction's responsible. Some cult—"

The humongous said several words.

"Fanatics!" the box shouted. Over and over.

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The Colonel carried the microphone with him, walking up underneath the alien. "But there's got to be some way," he said. "Assuming that you're telling the truth. These fanatics have control of your engines and your weapons, and you really can't take those systems back. But you know things. Your ancestors built this damned ship! And you're *not* going to be stupid. Not while your people are melting our icecaps. . . !"

The Colonel stopped screaming, catching his breath.

The humongous's face was straight above. As big as an elephant's face, it opened its black, black eyes, and the rubbery mouth said something.

The translation box said, "Move your people. Flee the ocean. That is the best solution."

"No!" the colonel roared.

"They only want your cold landmass. A tiny part of your world—"

"Bullshit." The Colonel threw down the microphone and screamed, "Someone get me tools. And that map!"

"Which map?" asked the woman soldier.

He said, "Of their bodies. Their physiology. I want to know what I'm dealing with!" Then he started to pull off his uniform—this was where Mom sent me to bed last night—and that's when I got up off the floor and turned the television off. It wasn't that I couldn't take it. It wasn't that I wasn't curious. It's just that someone new was walking up on the front porch.

The stranger said, "Hello."

I said, "Hi," through the storm door.

He was very tall and dark. All I remember about his face was that he looked as if he wanted to be somewhere else. Dressed in a suit, he looked strange. Maybe he was going to a wedding, I was guessing.

Staring in at me, he asked, "Is your father home?"

I said, "No."

Dad hasn't lived with us since I was three.

The stranger looked past me, squinting. Thinking to himself. He seemed halfway confused until he looked back, noticing what I was wearing. "Christ," he said. "You're the grandson, aren't you?"

I didn't say one word.

"Where is he?" the stranger asked.

Suddenly I felt sick, staring out at Grandpa's truck and the brown car parked behind it. I wanted to say something. I meant to lie, if only I could have thought of a good one.

But before I had one, a second man shouted, "I hear him! He's around back somewhere."

The tall man gave me another look, something sorry in his face.

Then he was gone.

I ran through the house, finding my way out the back door. I caught Grandpa washing his arms and bare chest with a garden hose and a lump of yellow soap. He was smiling, almost. The farmer was standing with him. Saying something. The dog was rolling himself dry in the grass. I could barely smell the skunk, and it was probably what was still sticking to me.

Grandpa said, "What is it, Sam?"

"Some men," I muttered.

Then the tall man was with us. All at once he was there, talking as if he'd done nothing all morning but practice what he was going to say now.

He said, "Sir."

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With a hurried voice, he said, "I've been asked by Senator Lee to come here and warn you. In an hour, the UN issues a warrant for your arrest. And it would be best for everyone if you'll surrender yourself as soon as possible—"

"Just a minute," someone snapped.

It was Mr. Teeson. Where I thought my grandfather would cut the man off, it was the bald farmer who said, "You bastards. You stupid, stupid bastards. . . !"

The strangers in suits blinked and straightened their backs.

"This man," said the farmer. "He's a great man! Don't you children understand that simple fact? If it wasn't for Colonel Sattis, none of you pissy little ungratefuls would have ever been born. . . !"

The tall man said, "Mr. Sattis."

Grandpa was shaking. From the cold, maybe. He turned and picked up his shirts and his pants off the ground, and with a weak hand, he tried brushing away bits of dried grass. But it was too much work, and he gave up trying. He put on his pants and shirts, one after another, and after a minute, the tall man repeated himself.

"Mr. Sattis."

"Colonel Sattis," the farmer told them.

"Colonel," said the tall man. "Your old friend's doing you a considerable favor here. If it wasn't for his personal intervention, a brigade of marshals would be coming for you . . . instead of us. . . ."

I remembered the Senator. I remembered him laughing, drinking beer, and eating catfish on my grandfather's patio.

"Naturally," said the tall man, "you'll be free to retain legal counsel."

The farmer said, "Jesus!"

The second man growled, "This isn't your concern, sir."

Grandpa held up a hand, asking everyone to be quiet. Then he said, "I'm enjoying the day with my grandson. My grandson. And you come here under these circumstances . . . and what am I supposed to do. . . ? Go quietly. . . ?"

"We're warning you," said the second man. "We aren't here to arrest you!"

Grandpa looked at him, saying nothing. Then he looked upward as he finished buttoning his last shirt, asking, "What's going to happen? A trial?"

"Yes, sir," said the tall man. "There's got to be one now."

Grandpa said something under his breath. Then he looked in my direction, his face soft and white and very old. "So who finally filed charges against me?" he asked. "One of the humongoustarian groups?"

"Actually," said the tall man, "our own government is the plaintiff."

Again, the farmer said, "Jesus."

Grandpa just nodded, saying in a sour way, "Of course they would."

Mr. Teeson took a few steps, screaming, "If you don't get off my land, boys. . . !"

"Stop," said Grandpa. To everyone. Then to the farmer, he said, "Thanks, Jim. For all your help, thank you very much."

"This is bullshit," the farmer told him.

Grandpa didn't argue. He just turned to the others, asking, "May we finish our hunt? I promised this boy a pheasant, and we haven't seen even one bird yet."

The tall man looked at his partner, then down at his shiny shoes. "We aren't here to arrest anyone, Mr. Sattis. Like we told you."

"But we could escort you home again," said the other man.

Grandpa opened his pants and stuffed in his shirttails. He didn't move quickly, but he knew what he was doing. He told them, "Thank you for the generous offer. But I don't think so."

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Then he looked at me, something in his eyes scaring me.

Nobody knew that there was a camera inside the wall.

The wall and camera were destroyed along with the rest of the king's room. Melted away by the nuclear blast. My grandfather set the nuke himself. He did it because his team needed time and confusion to get where they needed to be. To do what had to be done. And for setting the bomb and killing at least a few thousand of the king's followers, Grandpa won the first of three Medals of Honor.

Grandpa never knew that he was being watched.

He set off the bomb not to hide evidence, but to help.

Everything seen by that camera—not just that day, but for the last ten thousand years—ended up inside a different part of the ship. Sitting, and waiting. The humongous had a thing about the past. A fat chunk of their starship was left to shrines and cemeteries and digital warehouses full of everything that had ever happened on board. Every tunnel and big room, and even their toilets, had cameras. It took our best scientists ten hard years just to learn how to pipe power into those warehouses. Then it took ten more to learn how to get anything out of them but random goop. And it's still awfully tough working inside the starship. Without a breath of air in the place, every walk means spacesuits. And without one watt of power on board, every light and every machine needs its juice from human reactors strung clear out on the outermost hull.

I've read plenty, and I've seen even more on television and in the movies. But what I knew best was what Mom told me. Not Grandpa. Nobody was supposed to ask him about the humongous. Mom always told me, "He doesn't like to dwell on the war." Then she would do it for me, telling what little she knew, telling the same handful of stories over and over again.

Last night, after watching too much of the news, Mom told me her favorite one again. As if for the first time.

She told me how she'd seen the war.

"I was about your age," she began. Which is how she always began, even when I was only five years old. "And you can't imagine how scared I was," she told me, sitting in the middle of the television with me, holding my hand with one of hers.

"The world was being attacked," she said, "which was one of the reasons I was scared. It was a totally unprovoked attack. You know what unprovoked means?"

"Unfair," I volunteered.

She nodded, saying, "It was that, too. You're right."

Then she swallowed some of her cocktail, and wiped her eyes, and she said, "But I was more scared because it was my father who was up there. Who was leading the counterattack."

I nodded, acting as if I didn't know anything.

"The aliens were talking to us with different voices," she said. "Everyone knew it. Some of the voices were halfway friendly, and others just told us to get back from the ocean. And meanwhile, the south pole was melting, and seas were rising, and Mom and I were hiding in the basement, knowing that it was just a matter of days or hours until those awful energy guns would be pointed at us."

She shook her head, saying, "You can't imagine how it was!"

I thought I could, but I didn't say it.

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She took another swallow, then said, "I got tired of the basement." As if she was afraid that I might tell someone, she said, "Against Grandma's orders, I sneaked out into the yard, in the dark, when I knew that the starship would rise up in the south. If it fired at me, I was dead anyway. Outside or in the basement, or ten miles underground, I would die . . . and before that happened, I needed to see the starship for myself. . . ."

"You saw the starship die instead," I said. I couldn't help myself.

She acted as if I'd done something wrong. Breaking a rule, maybe. But instead of saying so, she put her hands in her lap, saying, "I saw it happen. When every hatch and airlock and those . . . those dilation zones . . . when the reactors quit and they opened up, I saw all that air and cold water pouring out of the starship. . . !"

Mom swallowed, telling me, "That was the worst moment, Sam. I didn't know what was going on."

Then she squeezed my hand, telling me, "But I know better now. And now what I saw—what I remember so clearly—looks beautiful to me. What I remember . . . it was like some enormous comet was born right above me, milky and spreading all the way across the sky. Later I found out that the world was saved, and it was my own father who had done it. He did most of it himself. And I don't think that there's ever been a happier, prouder child than me."

She took another sip of her cocktail, and another.

Then she told me something new. Something that I never expected.

"When your grandfather came back to earth," she confessed, "and after all the parades and interviews and the medal ceremonies, he came home. Finally. It was the middle of the night, and he walked into my bedroom and sat on the edge of my bed, and he put his face down into his hands, and he cried. That's the only time that I've ever seen your grandfather cry. When Mom died last year, there weren't two tears from him. But he sat there and wept for almost an hour. . . !"

I had to ask, "Why?"

"Because." It was obvious to Mom, but she needed a sip before she said it. "Because he was so very glad to see me, Sammy. And that's all it means!"

The farmer felt awful. Felt sick.

He said so, and he looked so, his face twisted as if he was ready to bring up his breakfast. "The bastards," he kept saying, walking us back toward the truck after the men in suits had gone. "Of all the nerve! Tracking you down, just to harass you. . . !"

Grandpa didn't say one word.

Solomon was hunting again, following a scent out of the yard and into the trees. Grandpa looked at his dog, but he didn't say anything.

I shouted for him. "Come here, boy. Come!"

But the dog had gone deaf again.

"It's not fair," the farmer sputtered. "Trying to punish you like this. Now. They feel guilty, and this is how they try to make things right."

Grandpa gave a little half-nod.

"Christ," said old Mr. Teeson, "it isn't as if you *knew*. . . ."

We'd reached the truck, and Grandpa stopped at his door. Doing nothing.

"You didn't know," said the farmer.

Grandpa turned. "What do you mean?"

"About the humongous, and what the king was telling you . . . all of that . . ."

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"What was the king telling me?"

The man licked his lips, then said, "The ship was split up into factions. With the worst group trying to make a home for itself."

Grandpa didn't make one sound.

The farmer pulled a hand over his scalp, then looked at me. Talking only to me, he asked, "So what if the king was telling the truth? Nobody understood those aliens, and your grandfather had to act. He had to do *something*—"

"Shut up." The same as he said it years ago, talking to the humongous, Grandpa told Mr. Teeson, "Shut up." Then he turned and shouted, "Come on, boy! We're leaving!"

As hard as his stiff legs could manage, Solomon came back across the yard.

"I'm sorry," the farmer whispered.

Then he said, "Colonel," one last time.

Grandpa opened the back door and grumbled, "Get in."

The dog tried, but he was too sore and too tired.

He whined when his jump fell short, and Grandpa grabbed him by the neck and threw into the back, making him squeal even worse.

I had never, ever asked him about the humongous or the starship.

I knew better.

It was so much of a rule that I couldn't remember ever being told not to do it. Although I must have been. Mom or Grandma must have said, "Don't," in an important voice. "Don't ever," they would have told me. "He doesn't like talking about it, Sammy."

I didn't ask. Even then, I didn't.

Grandpa was driving again, following a good road between the fields and little ribbons of trees, and the dog was in the back, licking his sore spots. Grandpa was the one who said, "You know what they haven't found? Those three days before. The three days we spent talking to that king. Talking to his princes or his advisors, or whatever they were. Hearing things that sounded like promises. Only nothing ever changed.

"'We are working,' they said. 'We are trying.' They kept chanting, 'Soon, soon, soon, soon, soon.' And all that time, people were dying, and cities in every part of the world were drowning."

I stared at my grandfather, saying nothing.

"That idiot Teeson was right," he told me. "There was plenty that I didn't know. Like why it smelled inside their ship. As bad as skunk, almost. I assumed that because they were aliens, they must have liked the stink. The king didn't tell me that their ship was on its last oars, and the stink and those enormous empty rooms and all the factions and all of the rest of the bullshit were measures of how bad things had gotten."

He said, "Sam." He said, "Do anything, and there is always something you don't know. Always. Even if it comes out for the very best, there were facts and figures that you didn't consider. And that's why it's the weakest, sickest, saddest apology to say that you did it wrong because you didn't have some perfect golden knowledge at your disposal."

He seemed to be talking to me, but thinking back, I know that he was talking more to himself. His voice was steady and dry and strong, and a little bit strange because of it. Grandpa couldn't have sounded more like his old self. And for reasons that I couldn't name, that made me feel scared and a little bit sick.

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All at once, he said, "Here."

We turned off the paved road, following the edge of a wide field. And that's when I remembered the place. Last year, we'd come here to hunt, and this was where I shot my first pheasant. I could still see the shot in my mind, all those feathers knocked loose and the bird dropping and me racing the dog to get to it first.

At the top of a little hill, we stopped.

But instead of hunting, we sat. Saying nothing.

Grandpa turned on the television, jumping through the channels until he found what he wanted. Then with his steady voice starting to break, he said, "Your mother hasn't let you watch it clear through. Has she?"

I looked at him, and blinked, and I managed to say, "No, sir."

"Watch it now," he told me.

He ordered me.

Even on that little screen, it was sick to see. There was my grandfather, suddenly young, standing naked underneath the alien king. He was covered with pink blood, and he was holding a long knife, and dangling beside him were two of the king's dicks. The third dick was lying at his feet, long as a man is tall, and like a live fish, still flopping. And Grandpa was screaming, "Tell me! How do we stop them?! *How?!*"

"I die," the king answered, his voice huge and weak at the same time. "Please. I die. Please."

Grandpa shoved the knife up into the body itself, letting a river of blood pour over him. And he screamed, "The leads! Give 'em here!"

Someone came running, a black and a red cable in hand.

"Where is it?" Grandpa asked, looking down at some sort of biological map.

Someone said something. I couldn't hear what.

Neither could he. "That fat bunch of nerves . . . where *is* it. . . ?!"

The woman came close enough to point—

And Grandpa shoved the wires up into that wide wet hole, then stepped back and said again, "How do we stop this?"

"I die," said the king.

Grandpa turned and said, "Do it!"

Someone said, "Sir—?"

"*Shit!*" he screamed. Then he moved over to a human-made box and hit a red button, and nothing happened for a half-second. Maybe longer. Then the king gave out a wail, big and deep, and he started to move, caught between those two strong nets and flopping like his own dick, only faster. Stronger. Flopping and flinging himself, and screaming right up until the nets broke free and he dropped onto the bloody floor. And he still kept moving, that whole long body arching up until Grandpa finally hit the red button again.

Again, Grandpa asked, "How can we stop this?"

The king said, "No."

Then he said, "I won't tell you."

And Grandpa, my grandpa, turned off the television. He said, "Look at me." Then he took both of his thumbs, wiping the tears off my face. And after a little while, he said, "Wait here. Stay with the truck."

I didn't feel like hunting.

Not anymore.

I was numb and sick, and sadder than I thought I could ever be. I barely heard Grandpa opening the back end, then shutting it again. Then I didn't

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hear anything until this sobbing started, and I forced myself to turn and look into the back. The dog was in the back end of the truck. Tied up. He was saying, "I want to go," with his little-kid voice.

I climbed out and went around back. It took me a minute or two to figure out the latch, then lift the gate high enough to unlock it. Then I saw which gun was missing, and I picked up the empty case, not really thinking. Just feeling sicker all the time. And the dog begged. Not using words, but sounding like an old-fashioned dog. So I undid the leash, and he jumped down and started off down along a line of trees.

I followed him.

I found myself starting to run, my boots heavy and getting heavier. But I kept the dog in sight, right up till he slid down down into a draw. And I got to the draw and stopped, spotting my shotgun's safety lying at my feet.

"I am dismantled," the machine told me.

There was a little pond in the draw. And trees. Grandpa was sitting on a downed log with the gun barrel put up into his mouth. He didn't hear me. He was too busy working at the angle of gun, trying to get everything just so.

I tried to talk.

My voice quit working, but I managed to make a whimpering sound.

Then without pulling the barrel out of his mouth, he halfway turned and saw me, his eyes getting wider and brighter, and somehow farther away.

I stepped closer.

Talking around the barrel, he told me, "Go away."

I was thinking what he said about never knowing enough. About how a man can't just wait till he has perfect knowledge to act.

Grandpa was crying.

"Leave me alone," he said. Louder this time.

I don't know where I got the strength, but I told him, "No."

Then I told him, "They're going to find you innocent. If you explain things."

Then I sat down on the ground. Waiting.

After a little while, Grandpa managed to pull the barrel out of his mouth and put the gun at his feet, and acting more embarrassed than anything, he wiped at his tears and the rest of his face, and he pulled out a comb and ran it through his hair. Three times. I counted. Then with a tight little voice, he said, "Sam."

He said, "Do me a favor? Pick up this gun for me. Would you, please?" ○

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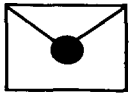

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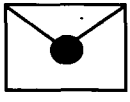

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James Patrick Kelly

BIERHORST, R. G., SEERA, B. L., AND JANNIFER, R. P. "PROOF OF THE EXISTENCE OF GOD AND AN AFTERLIFE."

JOURNAL OF EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY.
VOLUME 95, SPRING, 2007, PAGES 32-36

Of his latest story, James Patrick Kelly says, "It may be only an urban legend, but I heard once of a cash reward offered to anyone who could prove that God exists. I thought this an intriguing notion, but it didn't become a story until it exchanged genetic material with an idea I had about some potentially disastrous side effects of time travel. The result surprised the hell out of me."

"Remember the future?" said the subject. He fumbled an old envelope from the pocket crawling across his yellow T-shirt. Jannifer frowned as the kid wrote the words down. *Remember. Future.* No one had ever taken notes before.

"Time isn't a river," Jannifer continued. "It's . . ." Momentarily distracted, he glanced down at the questionnaire the kid had filled out as part of the experiment. ". . . It's a field." Subject was Timothy Corrigan, freshman English major, claimed he wanted to be a poet. "Not only this second," said Jannifer, "but ten minutes ago, ten minutes from now and ten years from now are all within our range."

Corrigan nodded. "Time present and time past are both present in time now."

Jannifer stared at the kid blankly.

"T. S. Eliot," said Corrigan. "*Burnt Norton.* No, this is good stuff." He held his pen ready. "So how do I remember the future?"

"With the help of our apparatus over here, you can make brief and controlled excursions through the field in any direction." The first time he'd given their phony pitch to a subject, Jannifer had been shocked at how well it worked. Shock had long since given way to disillusionment. People were so bone stupid about science. Give somebody a lab coat, a computer, and a dentist's chair dummied up with readouts and he could fool the world. Or at least a naïve English major. "But I'm afraid I can't allow you to take any more notes, Mr. Corrigan. This is a secure area. You did sign the release."

"Sure, sure. I understand." Corrigan folded the envelope back into his pocket.

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"Now then, your entire life exists, and has existed from the instant of the Big Bang. All your lives."

"All?"

"I don't suppose you've taken quantum mechanics yet? We could go over the equations. Wait, what did you say your major was?" He pretended to scan Corrigan's questionnaire.

Corrigan shook his head emphatically and his long black hair fell across his forehead. "I about flunked geometry in high school." He smiled as if it were a badge of honor.

And morons like this can vote, thought Jannifer. They open checking accounts that they have no idea how to balance. They make babies. "All right, then," he said, "the gist of the theory is this: at every second, no, every *nanosecond,* reality branches into an infinite number of universes. All possibilities, no matter how remote, are satisfied in one or another."

"I am large," said Corrigan. "I contain multitudes." Jannifer realized that the kid was saying these odd things to show that he was trying to understand.

"I suppose." Jannifer rubbed the back of his neck; the last procedure of the day was always the hardest. "Okay. Your brain is constantly collapsing these potential alternate universes, thus cutting off your access to them. It's what creates the illusion of time's directionality."

For the first time, Corrigan looked confused. Jannifer wasn't surprised. From past sessions, he knew that this was the weakest part of the script. If only they had asked him, he would have concocted some *convincing* rubber science. But this was Bierhorst's experiment. If Jannifer strayed too far from the script, he would introduce unwanted variables, skew the data.

"We still don't understand exactly how this brain mechanism works. It's part of why we've asked you to take part in the experiment. Don't worry, you won't be in any danger. We've put over a hundred subjects on the apparatus without incident. But we're on the cutting edge of science here—there are no guarantees. You understand that?"

Corrigan braced himself and nodded. The younger subjects seemed to like a little whiff of danger. It made them feel brave when they took the hook.

"We can send you into your personal time field out as far as it goes. It says here you're not married. Is that right? Well, you might meet your wife—or wives." Jannifer was supposed to chuckle here, but since he was no actor, the sound came out more like a cough. "Watch your kids grow up. And what will you do with your life?"

"Could I see how I die?"

Got you, thought Jannifer. Once again, the predictions of Bierhorst's goddamned model proved accurate: 84 percent of college kids brought up the idea of visiting their own deaths, 67 percent of them before the second scripted hint. The older populations had even higher numbers; 98 percent of nursing home subjects expressed interest in a terminal vision.

Jannifer shrugged. "It's your future. You're the explorer. We have no way to place restrictions on what you look for."

Corrigan glanced away from Jannifer toward the apparatus. "So then it really isn't a time machine? That's what I'd heard."

"No, your brain is the time machine. The apparatus just turns it on." Jannifer rested a hand on the kid's shoulder. "May I call you Timothy?"

The kid shook his head. "Just Tim."

"You've been hypnotized before, Tim?" Jannifer began steering him toward the chair.

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"No."

"Well, all indications are that you will be an excellent subject."

He settled Corrigan in the chair and plugged the electrode headband into the EEG processor. The status light went from red to green. The EEG was the only instrument that actually worked in the room; everything else was a prop. Jannifer swept Corrigan's hair off his forehead and positioned the band so the electrodes snugged over his temples. The processor took a few seconds to calibrate the input from the band before its raw data readout blinked and displayed the waveforms of Corrigan's brain.

Corrigan watched him with wide, bright eyes the color of almonds. There was a scatter of freckles across the bridge of his nose; the corners of his eyes had yet to wrinkle. The kid had the face of a someone who had never made a mortgage payment or been passed over for promotion.

"Are they ever sorry?" Corrigan said.

"Sorry?"

"That they remember their futures. Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise."

"No one ever complained to me, if that's what you're worried about."

"Not worried, just curious." He smiled. "And what do they call you? Doctor Jannifer? Mister Jannifer? Mister Doctor?"

"Richard." Jannifer found himself liking Tim Corrigan, even if he did have the common sense of a moth. After all, the kid had a good excuse for being innocent. What was he, nineteen? Twenty at most? If Jannifer had known everything at that age, he would've crawled into the nearest closet and nailed the door shut.

"So Tim, I want to be sure you know exactly what's about to happen." Jannifer had recited the last part of the script so many times he had a tendency to rattle through it. He forced himself to speak slowly, with conviction. "First, I hypnotize you. We do this primarily to help you concentrate. You have to turn inward as you never have before, block the outside world entirely. Then I activate the apparatus, which gives you access to the time field created by your brain. Jump to any time location you choose, although, for the purposes of our experiment, we ask that you explore your future. Since you're feeling disoriented at first, I help you make that first jump. Then I leave and there are no further distractions. You're on your own. I'm in the control room, taking a video, audio, and electroencephalographic record of the session. Please tell us, if you can, where and when you are and, in general, what's happening. Don't bother with details. You'll remember everything you experience; there will be an extensive debriefing afterward. Ten minutes into the session, we turn the apparatus off and bring you back. I should warn you that people seem to find this the most jarring part of the experience. No matter whether you want it or not, you'll be swept out of the future and returned to the present. Safely to the present. All right?"

"Sure."

Jannifer still felt uneasy playing Bierhorst's tricks, even in the cause of science. Corrigan thought he was going on an adventure through time, when all that was really going to happen was Jannifer would make a hypnotic suggestion that he imagine his own death. In a couple of hours, he'd be just another stat for their paper, *Age Progression and the Terminal Vision: A New Diagnostic Tool.*

Bierhorst's paper—Jannifer would be lucky to get his name on it. The truth was, he had never been all that enthusiastic about Bierhorst's idea that

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they had to convince *progression* subjects that they were "remembering" a real future, just as those undergoing hypnotic *regression* believed their recaptured memories to be true. But Bierhorst had gotten the grant and so here Jannifer was, pulling a science con on this dewy undergrad. About the only protocol battle Jannifer had won was that he was allowed to monitor EEG.

"Are you ready to begin?"

"Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow," droned Corrigan, "creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time."

"I'll take that as a yes. All right, then. Do you see the clock on the wall? I want you to watch the second hand, ticking away. Focus, Tim. Good. You're feeling very relaxed, with each tick you can feel tension draining away. Imagine you've been up all night doing a paper but it's done now and you've handed it in and you're getting an 'A.' So now you can just ease back and enjoy. You stayed up very late working on it, Tim, and you're tired, but that's okay. Maybe your eyes feel a little droopy. Let them close if you want. You've earned it. That's it. Deep breaths. You know, now that your eyes are shut, I'll bet you can't get them open again, no matter how much you want to. Go ahead, try. See what I mean? But if I tell you now that you should open your eyes for me, Tim . . . ah, very good. We can begin."

Jannifer turned to the computer beside the chair and tapped the enter key. The monitor scrolled nonsense code at subliminal speeds and then stopped on the blue welcome screen. The words, *Opening temporal field,* pulsed twice before being replaced by a digital clock that began counting backward: *10:00, 9:59, 9:58, 9:57.*

"As you can see, Tim, I've turned on the apparatus. Its effect begins almost immediately. It's subtle, nothing you can sense directly, no sights or sounds at first. But you should feel a kind of lightness, or maybe a surge of energy? Concentrate, now. It's a feeling of power, Tim. Nothing can hold you. Do you have that feeling?"

"Yes."

"Good, then it's time to take your first step into the future. What I want you to do, Tim, is jump to the end of your session with us. We've finished our debriefing and you're leaving the lab, all right? You cross the waiting room on your way out—are you there?"

"Yes."

"You come to the door. Look at it. It's unusual, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Before you leave, take a moment and tell me about the door."

"It's heavy, made of some kind of wood." Corrigan made his voice small, as if he were talking in church. "It looks old. It doesn't have a knob but a kind of handle thing. Brass. It has panels, one, two, six panels. A long pair below the handle, another long pair above and at the top two square panels."

"What color is it?"

"Green—dark, dark green."

"Good, Tim. Very good. You should be proud of yourself. You've made your first jump in time, a couple of hours into the future. I'm going to leave you now. When you open that door, your entire future will be before you. Go anywhere you want—to work, to a lover, to your death, if that's what interests you. You haven't got much time, less than ten minutes now, so remember only what is most important about your future. Good luck."

In the control room next door, Bev Seera was eating a sub from Nicky's and

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grading papers for her *Intro to Personality* class. The control room, a windowless space with white cinder block walls and gumspot gray linoleum, was furnished with folding chairs and a couple of long tables they had borrowed from the cafeteria. Their equipment consisted of two computer towers and keyboards, a printer, speakers, microphones, earphones, telephones, a mess of wiring that spilled like plastic spaghetti across the tables, and three monitors. Two of them showed different views of Tim Corrigan, the other displayed three-dimensional histograms of his EEG. "I liked the term paper imagery," Seera said, without looking up. "That just come to you now?"

"Haven't I told you," said Jannifer, dropping onto the chair in front of the video monitors, "what an inspiration this whole experiment is to me?"

"Bad attitude makes bad results, Richard."

"Where both deliberate, the love is slight." Corrigan's words purred through the speakers. "Who ever lov'd, that lov'd not at first sight?"

"What's his problem, anyway?" said Seera.

"Thinks he's a poet."

"Poor bastard."

"We're leaving the party," said Corrigan. "Her name is Lucianna."

"Sounds like he'll be stopping soon for a little sexual interlude." Seera reached for the next paper. "So will this one get to terminal?"

"Oh my," said Corrigan. "*Oh.*"

"I'd say yes." Jannifer turned the volume down. "You want that pickle?"

Corrigan continued making soft, throaty noises, his body twitching occasionally in the old dentist's chair. When he fell silent, the monitors were showing what looked like a sheen of sweat on his forehead.

"He's hooked all right," said Jannifer. "Kid *believes*."

The silence stretched to more than a minute. Then two.

Seera emerged from her papers and shot Jannifer a questioning glance. There were four minutes and twelve seconds left on the clock.

"What can I say?" Jannifer shrugged. "Ten minutes ago, I couldn't shut him up."

"Kid, you're supposed to talk, kid," said Seera, although her microphone wasn't on. "We need benchmarks."

Jannifer peered at the close-up monitor. "You think something happened to him?" Bierhorst's grant hadn't been enough to pay for new hi-res videocams.

Seera came up behind him. "He looks kind of different."

"Different how?"

"I don't know. Bigger maybe?"

As soon as she said it, he knew she was right. Jannifer had been watching too closely to notice that Corrigan's shoulders had broadened—just a little. His cheeks had fleshed out and there appeared to be an extra fold at his chin.

"The woods . . ." Corrigan sounded as if there were something stuck in his throat. His T-shirt had ridden up at the waist over a couple of inches of pale skin. A beer gut the kid didn't have bulged.

". . . Decay . . . ."

They watched as Corrigan's hair began to fall out. A dark strand slid down his cheek and he sneezed. That set a little tuft adrift from his head; it caught on his T-shirt, black tangle on yellow fabric.

Jannifer turned on the nearest microphone. "Tim, this is Richard." It was a violation of all the protocols. "What's happening?" They'd have to throw this procedure out. It struck him as a funny thing to be worrying about at a time like this. It was so funny that he wanted to laugh.

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"The woods," Corrigan said, in a quavering voice, "decay and fall."

"Jesus," said Seera. "What the *hell* is this?"

But Jannifer didn't answer. He was already through the door and into the room where Corrigan was. Only the kid was gone. In his place was a flabby middle-aged man, whose fair skin darkened and wrinkled as if it were being burned by a slow flame. As he went to him, Jannifer passed the monitor, still counting backward: *2:23, 2:22, 2:21.*

"Tim?" Jannifer nudged him gingerly to get his attention. "Where are you?"

Whatever was happening now accelerated. Corrigan's head lolled toward Jannifer and he smiled. "At the quiet limit of the world." A tooth slid out of his mouth as he spoke, bounced off Jannifer's arm and rattled across the floor like a button.

"No, you're not!" Jannifer caught Corrigan by the shoulders and shook him. "I was lying, everything was a lie."

Corrigan's head snapped from side to side. Jannifer could feel him shrinking in his grip, muscle withering away, skin sagging. It enraged him. "You idiot, you're not in the future!" he shouted. "This damn chair is just a prop. Stop it!"

"Richard!" Seera had followed him into the room; she was weeping. "*You* stop! You'll hurt him."

"Hurt him?" Jannifer let out the hysterical laugh he had been strangling ever since Corrigan had begun to age. "Look what he's doing to himself." He let Corrigan go and the old man slumped back onto the dentist's chair like an empty suit of clothes.

And died.

Jannifer didn't need to look at the flat readout or hear the EEG's maddening shriek. He knew. Corrigan's eyes clouded over and turned the color of spilled milk. And still it wasn't over; his corpse continued its unreal trip though time. Jannifer caught just the whiff of putrescence and his stomach lurched. It was a dangerous smell, a smell with claws. Then it was gone. Meanwhile, Corrigan's yellowed flesh was shrinking to the bone. Jannifer backed away from the body, which had already gone far beyond death.

"My God," said Seera. "Oh, my god!"

The rapidly decomposing carcass shivered as if in response. Impossibly, the dry muscle of the neck stretched and the lips pulled taut against the few remaining teeth and the thing that had been Timothy Corrigan turned to them and spoke. It sounded like the groan of mountains being uprooted, except that it was also the hot crack of a lightning strike and the crushing, liquid whisper of the darkest ocean trench.

"I AM WHO AM."

Jannifer staggered backward, bumped against table which held the EEG processor and the computer. He had a glimpse of the monitor with its now meaningless countdown—*0:13, 0:12*—then hurled himself across the table and over it, using the equipment to shield himself from the empty, infinitely dark sockets in the skull of the kid he had sent to God. Corrigan was the burning bush, thought Jannifer. *But I'm no Moses.*

He was huddled there when computer sounded its chime, once, twice, three times, signaling the end of the session. Despite himself, he was caught un-

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aware. It was a tiny noise compared to the shrilling of the EEG—or that vast and terrible voice—but the closeness of it unnerved him. He screamed and lurched away from it, fell and then scrabbled backwards toward the far wall. The monitor teetered off its perch on top of the computer and exploded against the linoleum.

The next coherent thought Jannifer had was how quiet it was. No EEG alarm, even though the processor was still on the table, its readout oddly alight. No sound at all, until Seera whispered.

"*Kid?*"

If she had gone mad, Jannifer was prepared to understand.

She found her voice and spoke aloud. "You all right?"

Jannifer heaved himself forward. "I don't know."

But she wasn't talking to Jannifer. Tim Corrigan was in the chair, his long black hair spread across the yellow T-shirt, his cheeks flushed and his eyes full of wonder. The next thing Jannifer knew he was standing beside him, kneading the kid's bicep to prove to himself that he was really alive. To prove . . .

"Where were you?" said Seera.

"Heaven," said Corrigan. "Or near it." He gazed up into their faces and then smiled wearily. "But I don't expect you to believe that."

"You were dead," said Jannifer.

"Yes." The idea seemed to amuse him; he laughed. "They got it backward, you know . . . just the opposite. In heaven, you burn. I could feel the fire crackling through my veins. My heart was a flame." Corrigan raised a hand to his face. "About, about in reel and rout the death fires danced at night." He stared as if he were looking through his palm at the afterlife. "It's not pleasure or pain or any one feeling. It's all of them and they consume you and what's left is like . . . no, it *is* God."

His babbling only provoked Jannifer. Without speaking, he jerked Corrigan out of the dentist's chair, dragged him protesting into the control room and shoved him into the chair in front of the monitors. "You sit there." He stabbed at the rewind buttons on both the tape decks. "You watch." The motors whirred and the tape sang back across the heads. "You tell us what happened."

Jannifer turned to the computer that had received Corrigan's EEG output and called up a display that compressed the entire session onto one screen. He settled onto the chair, not really sure it would hold both his weight and that of what he was seeing. It was all there, including more than two minutes of utterly flat EEG—the definition of brain death.

He had proof. Jannifer shuddered and hit the print key. He had hardcopy and videotape and two eyewitnesses to a miracle. Three, if you counted Tim Corrigan.

Proof.

The tape decks clicked to a stop, reset themselves, and began to play. He heard his earlier, blissfully-godless self saying, "As you can see, Tim, I've turned on the apparatus. Its effect begins almost immediately. It's subtle, nothing you can sense. . . ."

But Jannifer couldn't watch—not yet. He felt as if the hand of the Almighty were on his shoulder He, Richard Jannifer, had been chosen. But what was he supposed to *do*? What *could* he do? Nothing. Everything.

He picked up a phone and dialed Bierhorst's number. O

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NEXT ISSUE

SEPTEMBER LEAD STORY

Acclaimed British "hard science" writer **Paul J. McAuley**, winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award, the Philip K. Dick Award, and the John W. Campbell Award, returns to our pages next month with our September cover story, a vivid and suspenseful scientific thriller that takes us to the outer reaches of the Solar System, to a brooding Gothic monastery on the frozen surface of the Jovian moon Europa, where an intrepid investigator must match wits with a sinister group of fanatical monks in order to unravel a high-tech mystery with chilling implications for all of human civilization—if, that is, she can somehow manage to keep herself alive, against all the odds, through a "Sea Change, with Monsters." Rigorous, inventive, and stylish, both lyrical and wildly exciting, this is hard science adventure at its very best—you won't want to miss it!

TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Popular writer **Alexander Jablokov** takes us to a bizarre future suburbia for some weird, wild, and very unusual "Market Research"; Nebula and World Fantasy Award-winner **Michael Swanwick** returns with a disquieting and hard-edged look at a world forced to deal with the dire consequences of disasters that haven't even happened yet, in the unsettling "Radiant Doors"; **Gregory Frost** returns after a long absence to introduce us to a strange and evocative land where myth and dream are the stuff of everyday existence, and to tell us the wry, rude, and funny tale of "How Meersh the Bedeviler Lost His Toes"; **Mark W. Tiedemann** gives us an engrossing and compassionate look into the tortured soul of a soldier who's been lost in battle in a way that no other soldier has ever been lost before, in a powerful story that demonstrates that it's only possible to fly "With Arms to Hold the Wind"; and new writer **Robert L. Nansel**, making his Asimov's debut, takes us on a desperate, edge-of-your-seat chase across the face of a Moon divided into wary and hostile armed national camps, as he regales us with the engrossing—and surprising—saga of "Xiaoying's Journey."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column examines the millennia-old mystery of "The Gold-Digging Ants of the Lost Plateau"; and **Norman Spinrad**'s "On Books" column takes a hard look into "The Future of the Future"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features. Look for our September issue on sale on your newsstand on August 11, 1998, or subscribe today (you can also subscribe electronically, online, at our new Asimov's Internet website, at http://**www.asimovs.com**), and be sure to miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you this year!

COMING SOON

Exciting new stories by **Ian R. MacLeod**, **Robert Silverberg**, **Lisa Goldstein**, **Joe Haldeman**, **Bruce Sterling**, **Allen Steele**, **L. Timmel Duchamp**, **William Barton**, **Tony Daniel**, **Lois Tilton**, **Brian Stableford**, **Rick Shelley**, **Michael Swanwick**, **Kage Baker**, **Eliot Fintushel**, **Robert Reed**, **Nisi Shawl**, **Tom Purdom**, and many others.

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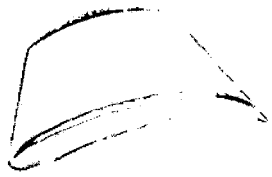
Gardner Dozois & Michael Swanwick

ANCESTRAL VOICES



During his tenure at *Asimov's*, Gardner Dozois has won ten Hugos for Best Editor. He has also been the recipient of two short story Nebula awards. Michael Swanwick has been a recipient of both the Nebula and the World Fantasy Award, and his novel, *Jack Faust* (Avon Books), is currently a finalist for the Hugo award. In "Ancestral Voices," this talented duo joins forces to provide a whirlwind of terror and suspense.

A word of warning. A few violent scenes in this story may be disturbing for some.

Illustration by Mark Evans

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Like all intelligent creatures, it adapted.

Behind it was fire! fear! pain! horror! and it fled from them through madness and roaring chaos, fled for a long nightmarish time through an unfamiliar world, through a phantasmagorical confusion of alien shapes and lights and stinks and noises, fled until its strength was gone and it could flee no more.

After that was the black churning darkness of oblivion.

When it came to itself again, awareness returning bit by incremental bit, it was in a dank and narrow alley between the back of a decaying flophouse hotel and the side of a liquor store, lying still in the deep black shadow behind a mound of overstuffed green garbage bags.

Warily, it surveyed its surroundings, taking in the tall brick walls that rose on either side, the muddy, slime-coated pavement upon which it rested, the dull red light—from an ancient, buzzing neon sign on the corner—that ebbed and flooded rhythmically through the darkness, the thin sliver of alien sky far overhead . . . and again it was taken by disorientation and fear. It reached instinctively for knowledge, for connection with the flood of data that would tell it location, status, mission, and instead it touched fire! fear! pain! horror! and recoiled from the searing agony of the memory.

Cautiously, it tried again to remember, like an electric linesman testing a live wire by gingerly brushing it with his thumb, and again it was driven back by the sizzling intensity of what lurked in the recesses of its own mind. Again and again it tried to remember, until its mind was ablaze with pain, and shudders ran like waves across the long flat carpet of its body. But nothing would come.

Its past was gone. It *had* no past—it had been born in that endless moment of pain and red screaming chaos, and before that it could not go. Instinctively it knew that it didn't belong here, that the world around it was alien, frighteningly *wrong,* but it couldn't remember how the world should be, what or where home was, what it was doing here in this place whose wrongness beat in upon its senses from every side.

Trembling, it lay flat in the cold mud of the alley. Each new sound from the unknown world beyond, each metallic roar or shriek or clatter, sent a new pulse of terror through it.

And then something blocked part of the light from the alley-mouth.

A monstrous figure loomed there, huge and dark and terrible.

There was the sound of a can being kicked underfoot, sent clattering away against the wall.

The figure moved slowly closer, down the alleyway, swaying, staggering from side to side, pushing a wave of rich alien stink before it.

"Oblah-*dee,*" the figure muttered. "Oblahfucking-dee, oblahfucking-*blah*—" It crashed against the wall, pushed away again. "Life goes fucking *onnnn,* blah—" The figure coughed, coughed again spasmodically, hawked and spat. "Sonsabitches," it mumbled. "Think they can tell *me* . . ."

Weaving. Coming closer.

It saw the wino with the colorless, directionless perception characteristic of its race, but, more importantly, it *felt* him, felt the rush and interplay of electrical impulses along the intricate pathways of the wino's nervous system, felt the cold living fire that pulsed about the cerebrum, felt the sensuous shifting and interweaving of alpha and beta rhythms. . . .

Suddenly, it was *hungry.*

The hunger rose in a bitter, biting flood, driving away fear, overwhelming

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everything. For a moment it didn't know what to do, and then instinct took over, a deep cellular knowledge that sent it rippling silently forward, deeper into the shadow cast by the wall of garbage bags, its mantle stiffening and rising.

It melded itself flat against the cold surface of the bags.

It waited. . . .

The wino had stubbed his toe and was cursing in a low, racking undertone. Then he stumbled forward again. "Wham-bam, thank you ma'am," he muttered. "*Oh* yeah. Oh *yeah.*" He lurched against the garbage bags, almost toppling them, then ripped one open with both hands and began rummaging clumsily, spilling tin cans and bottles and soggy old paper bags to the ground. "You don't know how lucky they *aarrrree,* boys . . . back in the—back in the—shit!" An empty pint crashed to the ground, breaking with a flat, pinpoint spray of glass. He chuckled. "Dead soldier. Don't make no nevermind. What I should of told her, what I *shoulda* told her. . . ." He fished an old sneaker out of the trash, examined it, wriggling his fingers through the large hole in the sole. "*Oh* yeah." He threw the sneaker aside, leaned forward into the shadow.

The wino's face filled its field of vision, huge, terrifying, slathered in bristly black whiskers, eyes as big and bloodshot red as harvest moons, the stink of corruption breathing from the slackened lips. . . .

"Molly stays at home and does her fucking face." He dug his arms more deeply into the trash. "Oblah—"

It struck.

The derelict jerked convulsively, as if he had walked into a high-tension line, jerked again, and toppled to the ground, bringing the trash can clattering down with him.

It stretched its body into a rope to follow him down, maintaining contact, feeding, feeding voraciously. . . .

On the ground, the wino twitched and quivered, already dead, his eyes rolled horribly up into his head, the whites gleaming in the starlight. It too quivered as it fed, its long flat body pulsing and swelling like a fire hose with a high-pressure head of water working through it.

Then—stillness. The wino's body had shrunken, collapsed in upon itself, sucked dry of all nourishment. Only the blood and bone and flesh was left behind. It spread its own body out, relaxing, allowing itself to form into a flat, almost-oval, molecule-thin carpet about five feet across.

But with the blunting of its hunger, fear returned.

Something huge and rank drifted past the alley-mouth, bellowing in a tremendous voice, making a terrible iron crash and clatter—

It started, contracting its body into a narrow ribbon again. The disturbance was only a garbage truck—but it didn't know that, and through its mind flashed again the torrent of fire! fear! pain! horror!

Without thinking, it rippled to the back of the alley and flowed straight up a wall. When it regained its composure, it found itself on a high place, empty space everywhere around it, open to the frighteningly alien sky.

Something swooped at it from that sky, shining a dazzling light. Something dark and enormous that seemed to skim by just a few feet overhead. The airport was just beyond, and to the residents of that particular flophouse hotel, it often seemed as if the big jets in the landing pattern were brushing their wheels on the roof as they went over.

Again it fled in unknowing panic, pouring itself like a tide of mist across

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rooftops, up walls, down rusting and dilapidated fire escapes. Instinctively seeking shelter from this nightmare place, it squeezed between the slats of a broken and boarded-up window, and found itself in darkness.

In darkness, it calmed again, its panic fading.

There were heavy, bulky objects around it in the gloom, its spatial sense told it, and gratefully it poured itself under them, working its way as far in as it could. Feeling safer for the sheltering mass above it, it let its mind drift into the neutral looping that served its kind for sleep. . . .

Early the next morning, a neural alarm jolted it back into active mode, and it watched from under a cluster of heavy Victorian furniture—dressers, hunt cabinets, wardrobes, highboys, roll-top mahogany desks: the sheltering masses of the night before—as a man came into the room, a bald-pated man with a frizzy halo of white hair around his ears and a hammer tucked by the claw-end into the breast pocket of his coveralls. It had found refuge in an antique warehouse, a rundown and half-abandoned brick building that had, sometime in the nineteenth century, been a harness-maker's factory. Now the downstairs floor was used as a workshop, while the upper two floors were devoted to the storage of antiques awaiting either renovation or delivery, room after room of dusty furniture, some of which had not been moved or touched in years.

Whistling, the man kicked at a wardrobe, tapped the joints a few times with the hammer, then tipped the wardrobe over so he could work the nails loose from the wood.

It had shrunk away at the close approach of the man's feet. Now it stirred and oozed forward again, sliding under a sideboard, a pharmacist's cabinet, a claw-footed bath basin, pausing finally under an overstuffed damask armchair to observe the workman.

Still whistling, the workman pulled a square of sandpaper from his hip pocket and began to rasp away at the wardrobe.

The fire-of-life was there, the crackling electric interplay of the nervous system. . . .

Hunger stirred in it again, and it felt its mantle stiffen and rise.

Slowly it slid forward. . . .

The workman tucked the sandpaper away in his pocket, picked up the hammer again, and tapped ruminatively at the wardrobe. The wan gray morning light gleamed from his bald head and glinted from his thick eyeglasses as he moved. He was a superstitious man, given to hunches and omens and premonitions, but now, in a supreme bit of irony, with death gliding silently up behind him, he was oblivious to its presence.

Death was a lightless black ribbon that reared up behind him, a hooded flat cobra-shaped shadow that loomed over him, paused, and with the slightest involuntary tremble prepared to strike, to reach out to claim him. . . .

Inches from the workman, so close his internal interplay of forces was a tantalizing tickle, it stopped. It stopped, made hesitant by a flicker of the same sort of shadowy, half understood instinct or almost-memory that the night before had taught it how to kill. The pattern of the fire-of-life was complex and intensely bright—this was certainly a sophont, and somehow it knew that killing sophonts could be dangerous if other sophonts learned of the killing, if you alerted them to your presence *by* the killing, especially if you were incautious enough to kill near your own nest or refuge. It was just now beginning to realize how much of its surroundings were artificial, *crafted*; the other night it had seen the buildings and rooftops and alleyways as

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natural formations, alien mountains and canyons and outcroppings of rock, and only now, replaying the thread of that memory, could it begin to guess how much of all it had seen so far had been *made*.

Created! This spoke of a world of almost unbelievable complexity, a world whose ways would have to be unraveled with patience and caution, and it dare not endanger the best refuge it had found so far just for a quick and easy kill.

It reversed direction, flowing backward as easily as it had flowed forward, disappearing under a chiffonier.

The workman continued tapping at the wardrobe, as unaware of his reprieve as he had been of his endangerment. As he put the hammer away and fished a screwdriver out of his belt, he began to whistle "Amazing Grace."Already deep inside the warehouse, the hammering and whistling fading behind, it sped through the dim and cobwebbed spaces beneath dustcovered harpsichords and mildewing Victorian sofas and wormholed grandfather clocks, seeking out the sealed-off and deserted sections of the building where men never went, seeking safer prey.

It adapted.

There were pigeons by the dozen in the deserted attic of the warehouse, and in the long-unused belvedere, boarded-up sloppily enough to be open to the sky on three sides, there were pigeons by the hundreds. There were cats on the surrounding maze of rooftops, and rats in the alleyways and sewers it learned to hunt by night. There was a little park a few blocks from the warehouse, and there among the trees and bushes it learned to take squirrels and field mice and nesting birds of all sorts. People would bring big dogs to the park and unleash them and let them run, and it took several of those, finding them very satisfactory. It needed a good deal of nourishment, fairly frequently, and finding that nourishment kept it busy.

It stayed hidden by daylight as much as it could, although it soon realized that the native sophonts were unlikely to spot it even then—it blended well with the stained and soot-covered and moss-overgrown walls of the city, and it traveled the roofways where people seldom looked. Electrical appliances and motor vehicles made it uneasy, and it stayed away from them; it had learned early that they were not alive, but their electrical fields touched off strange longings and sudden goosed scurryings of almost-memories that disturbed the placid mental status quo it had established for itself, the easy looping of its mind in ways that did not force it to confront the fire! fear! pain! horror! that always lurked somewhere just below its surface thoughts. It also had a strange effect occasionally on the electric appliances, though it didn't pay any attention to that.

It adapted, the weeks went by, and fall began to solidify into winter.

Prey became harder to find as the days grew colder. It often went hungry. It had made serious inroads on the local dog and cat population—although there were always a few strays drifting in to partially compensate—and many of the pigeons were nesting elsewhere now, having shifted their range for blocks and even miles to avoid the relentless horror that poured like smoke across the gables and ledges and roof-eaves. Even the rats had noticeably thinned out.

One dull gray afternoon, it took three children who were playing in the park, and that evening the park and the streets around the park were thick with men with flashlights, too many men to make further hunting possible.

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There was also the night that the Northern Lights danced faintly in the sky, and it danced with them, whirling and darting madly on the deserted, icy rooftops under the cold stars, feeling the enormous magnetic fields stir and scramble its emotions even at that great distance.

In that still and freezing night, fey and hungry and half-mad, it left its usual resting place in the ruined belvedere and went down through the building to the warehouse floor, penetrating deep into the tangles of stacked-up furniture, craving the solidity of mass between it and the dancing maddening fires that flared and dimmed on the horizon.

It found a drawer left ajar in a massive dresser that stood upright inside a thick wooden box, and slithered inside. It waited there in the darkness, jittering and buzzing with sick energy, unable to loop its mind into oblivion, nearly insane, occasionally striking furiously and futilely at the smooth wood inside the drawer.

Half an hour later, the white-haired workman entered the warehouse. He had had a hot roast beef sandwich and a couple of knocks of whiskey at the bar on the corner, and now he had one last task to finish up before he called it quits and went home. Taking off his overcoat, he reached over and snapped on his portable radio, but could get nothing out of it but a see-sawing squeal of static. He shrugged and switched it off—the damn thing had been going haywire off and on for a couple of months now, and the phones and the old black-and-white TV in the office had been on the fritz too, now and again. Sunspots, maybe, or some damn microwave relay tower nearby. Fry us in our goddamn jeans yet, he thought sourly, only dimly aware of the subconscious pun. He gathered up his tools and walked toward the massive packing crate.

A step or two from it, he stopped, and felt a chill shiver up his spine. "Somebody's walking on my grave," he said aloud, the words coming out flat and strange in this familiar place that all at once seemed too big and dark and echoingly empty. Gooseflesh had blossomed on his arms, and he ran his hands down over them to smooth it. There was a big Federal dresser in the crate, already surrounded by wood on three sides. The dresser's bottom drawer was standing ajar, and abruptly, without knowing why, he reached out with the toe of his work shoe and kicked it solidly shut.

Another chill shuddered along his spine, raising the tiny hairs on the back of his neck. It was funny that he'd never noticed how dark and cavernous it was here at night, or how black and spooky the surrounding shadows were.

Shivering, he manhandled the last end of the packing crate into position and began to nail, noticing that he was taking unusual, almost obsessive, care to make sure that the crate was closely and firmly sealed—again without knowing why—as though for some esoteric reason it needed to be airtight. A line from an old church song was running repeatedly through his head: *Amazing grace . . .* something something *. . . that saved a wretch like me. . . .*

When the job was done—and he took twice as long about it as he should have taken—but before he turned out the lights and went gratefully home, the workman took out a Magic Marker and on the side of the crate in large, somewhat shaky letters wrote:

Mrs. Alma Kingsley
Maple Hill Farm
Eden Falls, Vermont

* * *

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"Gamma, there's a truck with men outside!"

Alma Kingsley put her Manhattan down on the kitchen counter—carefully, for her arthritis was acting up again—and said to her granddaughter, "Dear child, please *do* endeavor to refrain from calling me 'Gamma' in the future. It makes you sound most deplorably winsome."

Jennifer beamed and laughed, as she did at all of her grandmother's more gravely sententious pronouncements. She didn't know what they meant, but they all sounded funny to her.

Meanwhile, however, the driver of the truck was leaning on his horn, and his assistant was at the tailgate, wrestling an enormous crate onto the lift. "Come, child," Mrs. Kingsley said. "Get your coat. You may find this interesting." She swept into the yard, little Jenny trailing after her like a hyperkinetic pull-toy.

Outside, the day was cold, with a promise of snow in the air—a promise seconded by a sky as uniformly gray and featureless as an old blanket. Beyond the rocky, frozen fields, a fringe of trees marked the ravine separating Maple Hill Farm from the Laferrier place—though their farmhouse was not visible from here. They were isolated, alone among the Green Mountains, and that was the way Alma Kingsley preferred it. She couldn't abide people tromping through here with their problems and their petty jealousies and ambitions. She'd put the world behind her more than a decade ago, when she gave up the editorship of *New England* magazine, and she liked it that way.

As they crossed the yard, a flight of three military jets screamed by, only a couple of hundred feet away, flying very low to the ground, black and sleek and predatory as mechanical sharks. The immense noise of their passing seemed to shake the bones of the world, and everybody looked up, Jennifer waving excitedly, the two workmen staring at them expressionlessly for a moment and then looking away. The jets roared away across the fields, still hugging the ground, afterburners blazing, hopped up over a distant ridge, and were gone. They left a shocked, ringing silence in their wake.

Alma Kingsley compressed her lips and kept walking. She didn't like military planes flying across her land, but there was little point in complaining at a time like this, when she'd only be ignored. They were practicing for war—practicing flying low to the ground to avoid radar, maybe, or perhaps doing mock strafing runs on her barn or the delivery truck. They'd get to try their hand at the real thing soon enough, the way things were going.

Jennifer was babbling happily to her about the planes, but she ignored her. The workmen nodded politely to her, not quite tugging the forelocks they didn't have anyway, and she nodded stiffly back. No one spoke. She gestured for them to unload the big crate, and tugged an inquisitive Jennifer safely out of the way while the lift lowered it ponderously to the ground, and the men grunted it onto a hand-truck.

Iago came bounding up from wherever it is that dogs go, barking furiously at the men, who ignored him. The huge black mongrel ran in frantic circles, from Mrs. Kingsley to the truck and back again, until she had to take him by the collar, swat him on the rump to get his attention, and—pointing firmly downward—order him to "Sit!" He obeyed unhappily, watching the unloading with a worried, disapproving expression.

She supervised the delivery, directing the workmen to take the crate—carefully!—into the old barn, which had once held a few cows and maybe a horse but now had been snugged up and served for storage space. They set the crate down and produced hammers and pry bars, and, with a shriek and

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squeal of protesting nails, the front came off, revealing her newest acquisition, a perfectly lovely piece that she had spotted on her last trip down south and which (not coincidentally) was the spitting image of a dresser her Aunt Dorothy had owned when she was a child, and which she had always, through all the intervening decades, lusted after. It was a triumph of will, her owning this piece, and the fulfillment of a girlhood oath, and she savored it as such.

"Now I'm going to want you to come back Tuesday, after the guests are gone, to place it in the house," she admonished the driver. Then, to her granddaughter, "No, dear, we do *not* root about on the dirty floor like small, ill-mannered swine." And again to the driver, "*Tuesday,* you understand, because I will not have you underfoot with company here. I'll need to decide which furniture to shift, as well."

The driver nodded slowly and, after a pause, said "Yep." There was a quiet censuriousness to his monosyllabic reply, as if it were an admonition to keep her words and reasons to herself. His assistant, chewing on something—either gum or "chaw," probably the latter—jaws agape and about as attractive-looking as a cow at its cud, was wielding his pry bar with abandon, splintering the crate's planks, threatening the absolutely priceless—and irreparable should it be damaged—patina of the wood. Until finally she could not bear to simply watch any longer.

"Hand me that pry," she snapped, and took it away from the gawking youth. There was a correct way to uncrate furniture; you sought out the joints and deftly, even daintily, applied leverage *there,* so that the whole thing popped open like a walnut shell under properly applied nutcrackers. Brute force was totally unnecessary. And so she would have shown him, only her arthritis chose that instant to seize up, and her hands became about as useless as clubs, and wouldn't close all the way around the pry. She made a feeble pass or two at the wood, but it was hopeless—the tool slid in her hand, refusing to obey her. She couldn't even *hold* the damnable thing.

She looked up then, and in a timeless instant of glaring horror saw that the driver and his slack-jawed assistant were both staring her with pity in their eyes. Jennifer, thankfully, was too young to comprehend, and stood looking on with innocent curiosity.

For a moment, she trembled with humiliation, and then, furiously, she flung the pry bar to the floor. Tears flooding her eyes, she gasped, "Oh, *you* do it!" and fled.

Behind her, the men quietly, red-facedly, settled the dresser into a dry corner. When it was in place, the driver rubbed it down with his pocket bandana to remove any greasy fingerprints, and swiftly pulled each drawer out a half-inch and back in again, to make sure that none had seized up in transit. He was a conscientious man, and always gave his work this extra bit of care and attention. But he wasn't anxious to linger, and it was entirely understandable that, in his haste, he didn't fully re-close one drawer.

It was dying.

Hunger had driven it to the sharp edge of starvation. It was already seriously sick, or it would have abandoned the dresser immediately upon regaining the mental equilibrium that served it for consciousness. No matter how comfortably enclosed, how nurturing and psychologically sheltering a niche it was, the drawer had proven unsafe. But the long exposure to first one, then another truck's electrical systems had weakened and disoriented it, and

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filled it with anguished glimpses of something that *was once,* or perhaps *ought to be,* but was now no more. It trembled shiveringly where it was, until the hunger rose up like a wall and forced it out.

Moving as swiftly—as noiselessly—as shifting shadows, it scavenged the barn, a whirlwind of silent wrath, in search of the fire-of-life all living creatures carried within. Up in the rafters it took a clutch of bats, engulfing them before they could stir from their upside-down perches, and felt better for it, unsatisfied, but no longer so ravenous. Again and again, it scoured the barn, knowing that there should be more prey, and bewildered by its absence.

Frequently it passed by yellow cardboard boxes with grain spilling out from them and of course could not recognize them as bait stations filled with rat poison. But it quickly came to realize that the nourishment it must have would of necessity have to be found outside.

Cautiously, it edged out into the farmyard, slipping easily under the barn door.

And—fire! fear! pain! horror!—found its spatial sense overwhelmed by land that stretched far and away, featureless and with no place to hide, no sheltering masses or deep crannies into which to duck, nothing but rolling, exposed emptiness for hundreds of times its own length. Off to one side was the farmhouse, surrounded by evergreen shrubbery and a few ancient oaks, but it hardly spared that a glimpse in its panicked retreat back into the barn.

Terrified, cold, and hungry, it returned to the half-open drawer to huddle shivering like a wounded animal, its mind looping furiously over and over again and still not easing out the jagged static terror. It waited, because it had to, waited for something to change, for food to come to it, or else for the hunger and need to grow so great that it would be forced out into the openness and emptiness where it currently dared not go.

Mrs. Kingsley was tucking Jennifer into bed when the child's father came up the drive. She carefully bundled the little girl in, first between a pair of flannel sheets, then under a thin electric blanket, and finally—to top it all off—pulling a double-wedding band quilt over all. The quilt was one her mother had made, in point of fact, and Alma Kingsley hoped to live long enough to pass it on to her granddaughter, when the child came of marrying age.

"It's snowing outside," Jennifer said as her grandmother smoothed down the quilt. And then, in that flat, absolutely sincere way children have of presenting their fantasies, she said, "And I saw a Monster from my window."

It was then, in a kind of ironic counterpoint, that the El Dorado purred up the long drive. Jennifer sat up immediately. "Is that Daddy, Gamma?"

Mrs. Kingsley smoothed the child down on the pillow, then turned to look out the window. A few small, bitter flakes of snow were falling from the black sky. They fell fast, a precursor of more to come. The El Dorado pulled off the drive, which was unnecessary, and onto the house's front yard, which was worse. It was winter and the grass was dead, but, still, that kind of treatment *hurt* a lawn.

"Yes, it's your father," she said. The car's front door opened and the man himself spilled drunkenly out. "No, don't get up. I am certain that your father would rather find you tucked angelically into bed than running about caterwauling like a wild heathen Indian. Parents are peculiar in that respect."

Jenny giggled appreciatively, if somewhat sleepily. Outside, the El Dorado's *other* front door swung open.

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Alma Kingsley slipped out of the room, snapping off the light. "I'll leave the door open a crack," she said. "Now you just lie there with your eyes closed, so when your father comes in to kiss you goodnight, you can open them and surprise him. Won't that be fun?"

The child nodded slowly, then twisted a bit to dig her cheek into the pillows.

"Sweet dreams," Mrs. Kingsley murmured.

She went downstairs to confront the father.

Iago came padding out from the kitchen as she threw a jacket over her thin shoulders against the terrible cold outside. He stood by her side, anxious with doggish worries of his own, as she flung the front door open. Desmond stood on the stoop, one arm flung around his roadhouse floozy's neck, grappling vaguely for her breasts, and the other digging through his pockets—with equal incompetence—in search of the door key. He gaped up stupidly at her.

"How *dare* you?" she whispered, so as not to wake the child. "Your own daughter is in this house!" The snow was falling more thickly now, slanting down fast and tightly together, filling the air. The air was so full of snowflakes you could choke on them. If you listened carefully, you could hear them hit, it was so quiet. A whispery, slithery sound.

Desmond released the woman. He looked directly into Alma Kingsley's eyes, possibly the first time he had done so since arriving at Maple Hill Farm. "You sanctimonious old bag," he said quietly, also unwilling to disturb the child. "Stephanie died over a year ago. And you know something? A year is a long time to go without. You'd know that yourself, if you could remember that far back. . . ."

The floozy—her hair was that hideous aniline red that positively shrieked its artificiality—hung back, embarrassed. Or maybe not; she gaped up at them from the car, as vacant-faced as a cow. Mrs. Kingsley didn't spare her a second glance.

"I will not tolerate having the morals of a child corrupted within my house!" She moved to slam the door shut in his face.

The father caught the door with one hand, and effortlessly held it open. He was a short, heavy man, with a dirty little fringe of beard. About as far from the Kingsley type as you could get, but a strong creature nevertheless. For an instant, she thought he was going to actually strike her, could almost feel the pain, the old bones cracking under porcelain skin. . . . But he didn't. He just grinned, a mean, drunken grin. "I don't *like* bringing Jenny up here twice a year," he said. "I only did it for Stephanie's sake, when she was alive, and now for Jenny. She likes being on your farm. But I'll tell you this—either you let us in or this is the fucking *last* time you'll ever see the child again."

She stood motionless in the doorway, losing heat to the out-of-doors while Desmond leered up at her. The snow was gathering already, a light powder-sugar frosting on the bare and frozen ground. The wind was already sweeping it to and fro. The air was cold on her face and it seemed to her that so long as she didn't move, she could hold back the future, keep from ever *having* to move, keep from slipping into a situation where she had lost control, where she was defeated before she even began.

At her heel, the dog whined plaintively. "Hush, Iago," she said automatically.

She moved aside.

In the morning, she set out four plates for breakfast—the good Spode china, too, as pointed a bit of formality as it was possible to give a guest. She

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considered turning on the big plug-in radio on the kitchen counter, all the company she had most mornings as she cooked a solitary breakfast for herself, but there was a delicious quiet and serenity out here this morning, the snow now falling heavily but without sound close outside the window, like a slow fall of feathers, muting the daylight and filling it with shifting highlights, so that it was like being all alone in a bubble on the bottom of the sea. She hated to shatter that peacefulness with noise before it needed to be shattered; Desmond would be down and rattling the china with his booming, cheaply genial voice soon enough.

Besides, there wouldn't be much worth listening to on the radio anyway. Sometimes she could pull in WGBH from Boston in the mornings and listen to chamber music or string quartets, but for months now there'd been too much static from all the sunspot activity to tune it in clearly, and all she'd been able to get for the last few days were somberly hysterical talk-radio stations yattering on about the current international crisis, lines being drawn in the sand, frantic diplomatic efforts, troops massing at borders, military alerts, security advisories, leaves being canceled, aircraft carriers on the move, and so on—and she was sick to the teeth of that. All the familiar stuff, saber-rattling, jingoism, the vitriolic outpourings of suddenly acceptable racism toward people we were supposed to *like* only a few months before. Primate Aggressive Displays, chimps hooting at each other and beating their breasts until they had worked themselves up into enough of a lather to attack. It seemed like she'd been hearing this stuff all her long life, one conflict after another, one enemy after another, and she was sick of it. Let them have their war and leave her alone, here in her own kitchen. She didn't have to listen to them *talk* about it!

"Hi, Gamma!" It was Jennifer, down first, chirpy-happy as usual, practically bouncing with enthusiasm. Remember when you had that much energy? Mrs. Kingsley thought wryly. Remember when you had a *fourth* of it? She let Jennifer help by setting out the silverware and napkins, while she fried up eggs and sausages and piles of French toast, all in an iron skillet with lots of Crisco.

The second one up was her son-in-law's roadhouse pick-up. She slumped down on a chair, eyes bleary under smeared makeup. Her hair was done in that kind of razor-cut where you can never tell if it's brushed or not. "Morning," she mumbled. She picked up a fork and stared at it, turning it over and over in her hand, as if she'd never seen Grand Baroque silver before in her life, and were searching for a clue to its purpose.

Sliding breakfast in front of her, Mrs. Kingsley was struck by the horrible realization that this young chippie was somebody's daughter, and probably came down to the breakfast table in exactly the same sullen way every morning, with grumbled greeting and averted eyes. Maybe she hadn't even noticed yet that she hadn't made it home the night before.

"It snowed *two feet* last night," the child announced. "Gamma says maybe it'll snow all day today, right Gamma?" Then, when Gamma didn't reply, "My name's Jennifer, what's yours?"

The woman stared at Jennifer, as if the girl had been suddenly and without warning plopped down out of the sky before her. "Candy," she said at last.

The child's father chose that moment to make his appearance. He lifted Jennifer out of her chair, hugged her, and held her up in the air while she squealed. Then he peered out the window. "Still coming down, eh?" He whistled. "Look at that drift over by the barn! Jesus!"

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Desmond was wearing jeans and a green football jersey with white sleeves and a double-zero numeral on the back. Bits of lint were stuck in his beard; it would never have occurred to him to brush it before breakfast. He took a sip from the coffee cup that had been awaiting him for the past ten minutes, ever since she'd heard himself clumping about overhead, and made a face. "Could you warm this thing up for me?"

Wordlessly, she took the cup from him, put it into the microwave, and switched the device on.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Candy looked up suddenly. "How deep did you say it was out there?" She went to the window and pushed the curtain aside. "Oh, no!" she groaned. "How am I going to get home through all that?"

"The plows will be by when the snow stops," Mrs. Kingsley said. "But this isn't a primary route, and while it's falling they're going to keep most of their machines out on the Interstate."

"My mom is going to have a *cow!* Where's the telephone?"

"In the hallway," Desmond said, and she hurried off without even pausing to ask permission.

A motion in the corner of her eye caught Alma Kingsley's attention then, and she suddenly remembered the coffee in the microwave. Brown liquid was bulging ominously over the cup's lip. Hurriedly she cut off the device, and it subsided. The cup was nice and warm; half the flavor was boiled out, but no need to mention *that*. She set it down in front of Desmond.

The young woman returned, throwing herself down into the chair with a kind of heavy despair. "I can't get through. There's this static and a kind of whooping noise, and nothing goes through."

"More than likely something wrong at the switching facilities," Mrs. Kingsley said. "The phone service here's never been much to brag about."

Candy worried a pack of cigarettes and a disposable lighter out of her disco bag and accusingly said, "Well, my mother is going to have a cow."

Mrs. Kingsley personally thought that the girl's mother's outrage was a day late and a dollar short, but she kept her opinion to herself. Aloud, she said, "No, my dear, I am afraid that I do not allow smoking at the breakfast table."

"Hah?" Candy looked down stupidly, lit the cigarette, and then hastily removed it from her mouth. "Oh—yeah, sure." She made as if to stub out the cigarette on her plate. Mrs. Kingsley hastily reached into the cupboards for an ashtray.

"Here." She thrust it at the young woman. It was ironic, the tyranny that smokers exercised over their betters. She herself had never picked up the disgusting habit, and yet had of necessity, over the years, acquired any number of ashtrays to accommodate friends and guests. "You can smoke in the hallway," she said. "Though it would be *nice* if you were to go outside when—"

But an angry glance from Desmond told her that she had gone too far. "Well, that would be unreasonable, of course."

"Damn straight it would," Desmond muttered. He was at the kitchen radio now, fiddling with it. It emitted an earsplitting, see-sawing howl of static, like a dying banshee. Wincing, he turned the knob from one end of the dial to the other, finding no stations, then grimaced and turned the radio off. He started to say "Shit!", cast a quick look at his daughter, thought better of it, and settled for an exasperated "Damn!" He came back to the table. "I'd hoped to catch the news."

"War, and portents of war," Mrs. Kingsley said sourly.

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Desmond grinned offensively at her. "Hey, sounds good to *me!*" he said. "That means I don't have to worry about being out of work, right?" He knew that she disapproved of his work for military contractors—"war work" she'd called it bitterly once, in a monumental argument a few months after Stephanie's death, correcting his euphemistic "defense work"—and he loved to bait her about it.

"There's a television in the living room," she said stiffly. "We get CNN even out here in the boondocks. Just keep the volume down. I don't care to hear it."

He shook his head. "You'd think you'd want to know what's going on. There's a *crisis* underway! Don't you care what happens?"

Mrs. Kingsley hesitated, and glanced toward Jennifer, but she and the roadhouse floozy were busy playing dolls together with the salt and pepper shakers; obviously Jennifer had found a companion on her own level of emotional development. "I don't care what happens anymore," she said, keeping her voice pitched low. "Let them have their war. Let them all kill each other. Unless they drop an H-bomb on Montpelier, I don't intend to take any notice of it."

Desmond made a disgusted face. "You've got your head in the sand! You think the real world is going to go away just because you don't like it? You have to deal with things as they *are*. *Do* something about them! If there weren't so many people who think like you, maybe Stephanie would still be alive."

They glared at each other, locking gazes. He'd stepped over the line, though, and he knew it, for, after a moment, he had the grace to look faintly embarrassed. Her gaze, though, was unflinching and unforgiving.

At that moment, opportunely, there was a scratching at the door, and she had to go let the dog back in.

"O base Iago! O inhuman dog!" she declaimed as the mutt bounded in. Candy stared at her uncomprehendingly. The little chit had probably never even heard of Shakespeare.

Iago was jumping up on her, panting and enthusiastically trying to wag his entire body. She looked deliberately at Desmond. "Let slip the dogs of War, eh?" she said, and smiled sweetly. She knew *he'd* heard of Shakespeare.

It was weakening. Perhaps it held enough reserves for another day or so, if it husbanded its resources. But that way lay oblivion and slow death; to survive it needed to strike out, to forage away from the comforting shelter of the barn, out into the flat, horribly open countryside.

It was hesitating by the door when the sound of trudging footsteps approached, heading straight for it.

Jerking back as if struck, it rose up, mantle stiffening, ready to attack. Then caution took over, and it retreated swiftly to the shadows, hunkering down into the darkest corner, every sense on edge, waiting, observing.

The door rattled, then flew open. Two sophonts stepped into the barn, accompanied by a wild skirl of snowflakes. They slammed the door shut noisily, and stamped their boots clear of snow.

It listened carefully to words it could not comprehend.

"I don't think your mother-in-law likes me."

"Don't take it personally. The old bat doesn't like anyone."

Stealthily, slowly, it moved. Keeping to the shadows and edges, it made its way to a wide support beam beyond the direct perception of the sophonts.

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Swiftly, it flowed up the beam's far side, up to the loft, and then to the rafters, just below the ridgepole. Given the choice, it was always best to strike from above.

It moved cautiously, always conscious of the gentle tickle of the fire-of-life below.

The shorter of the two produced fire. Smoke snarled through the cold air. It could not smell, of course, but it sensed the smoke as a flicker of ionized charges.

"Whew—I really needed that!" the shorter one said. She sucked in the ions again, letting them damp down within her lungs. "Here, have a toke."

The taller one made a disgusted noise. "Is that what we came out here for? To get stoned?"

Silently it moved among the rafters, flowing from brace to joist, and across the collar beams, until it was in position, directly above its prey. It rested invisibly over them, and prepared to strike.

The shorter one laughed. "What did you expect? I hope you didn't think I was going to screw you out in *this* weather!"

But they were both sophonts and sophonts were dangerous. It would have to take both of them to be safe, and it wasn't at all certain it could do that. Its reserves of strength were perilously low.

"I thought you had something you wanted to tell me. Let's go back inside, okay? It's too cold to stand out here smoking that shit."

"Damnit, I'm going to *need* this to get me through the afternoon. Did you see the way she was eyeing me at lunch?"

"Yeah, well, I've got a daughter back there in the house and I'd like to preserve a few of her illusions about her old man for a while longer, okay? So if you'll excuse me, I don't see any reason why I should hang around out here in the cold."

And then, incredibly, there was only one! The other sophont slammed out through the door, and his footsteps faded away rapidly in the falling snow.

It gathered itself together to strike. The distance was not great, and it was starting from an ideal position. With effort, it suppressed a tremble of excitement in its stiffening mantle.

The woman below huddled disconsolately in her parka. She sucked in a lungful of ions, and held them.

It struck.

"Gamma, where's Candy?"

The parlor was very quiet without the television or radio on—Alma Kingsley had tried them both (with Desmond coming right behind her and trying them again, as if she didn't know how to turn a television set on properly), and they wouldn't work right; sunspots or something—they had been very bad all this year, with the Northern Lights stronger and more frequent than she'd ever known them to be in all the years since she'd retired from the magazine—had scrambled all incoming signals. The phone still wasn't working either, and Desmond had gotten quite agitated—uselessly—about not being able to get in touch with the office. The rest of the morning had, to say the least, been tense. Desmond had finally retreated into his work, getting lost in that annoying way that he had, going so deep into it that nobody, not even Jennifer, not even Stephanie when she'd been alive, could reach him.

She put down her copy of *Paris Match,* and said, "I don't know, child. Somewhere in the house, I should imagine. Why don't you ask your father?"

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"She's *not* in the house," the child insisted. "I wanted her to play Barbie-doll with me, and I looked everywhere."

Desmond looked up from a briefcase full of flow charts and printouts and other tools of his arcane trade. "Hmmm?" he said. And when the problem was explained to him, "She ought to be back from the barn by *now*." With a sigh, he switched off his calculator, set down his ballpoint pen, and stood. "Now where did I leave my coat?"

Iago bounded up eagerly when Desmond opened the door, and insisted on following him out into the snow. The door slammed, and Iago's excited barking faded as they headed toward the old barn.

Five minutes later, Desmond returned, carrying Candy's body.

Mrs. Kingsley saw him coming from the kitchen window and—with a smothered exclamation of horror—hurried to throw open the door for him. Together they hurried into the parlor and laid Candy down on a couch.

It was possible now to assess the damage that had been done the woman. Her features were unnaturally sunken, the cheeks collapsed in on themselves, drawing the lips back from the teeth, and her stomach was literally concave, looking as if someone had punched it in with his fist. An ugly purple flush was still spreading over her face as hundreds of ruptured capillaries lost blood.

"She was just lying there!" Desmond said helplessly. "Like she'd had a heart attack or something. Is the phone still out? We need a doctor. Maybe I can . . . I could hike out to the road and flag down a car."

Alma Kingsley put a finger under the girl's nostrils. She touched her wrists, forehead, chest. She pressed down a fingernail, looked at the color.

"Desmond," she said, "it's too late."

She straightened, and her son-in-law did likewise, both involuntarily drawing away from the body, as if by so doing they could distance themselves from death. When she glanced away, Mrs. Kingsley saw that Jennifer was standing in the middle of the parlor rug, eyes wide and calm, staring at the corpse.

"Daddy," she said, "is Candy dead?"

Her father got a sick expression on his face, as if he'd been called upon to explain sex and reproduction to the child *right now,* with no blushing and no preparation. But he answered, voice flat and superficially composed, "Yes."

"Like on TV?"

Alma Kingsley regained control then, and gathered the two up. With a push here, a nudge there, she shooed father and daughter out of the parlor and into the kitchen. At her command, Iago followed. Then she closed the door.

To survive, it had to get into the farmhouse. It knew that now, with a kind of animal cunning that came before reason and intellect. There were sophonts within, and it was practically suicidal to attack a sophont within its own lair. But they were few in number, and they were isolated from their own kind. And while they were danger, they were *also* nourishment.

It hesitated at the doorway of the shed, baffled by the snow that had already drifted above the middle hinges. Then it flowed up the wall, climbing to the crack at the top of the doorway, and eased through. Halfway out it halted, stunned by how the world had been transformed. The falling snow formed complex, shifting patterns that disappeared the instant it got a fix on them. It was as if the world had been shredded and divided into component

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atoms, then instantly rearranged, again and again, a thousand times a second. All anew, it was struck by the sheer alienness of this world, where nothing was certain, where everything shifted and moved and changed. It wavered, flowed outward, flinched back again. Individual flakes of snow touched its surface, did not melt, slid off without sticking.

Had anyone been watching from the house, they would have seen it then, carelessly, dangerously exposed. But occupied as they were with their own troubles, no one was looking.

It advanced out onto the snow then, all in a rush, sudden and brave. Midway between barn and house, it halted. Nothing happened. It found it could partially filter out the flakes falling, though they disoriented and bewildered it still. Purposefully it set out for the farmhouse, a solid mass of potential shelter, unchanging, shot through with electrical fires and harboring at its heart the precious rumor of fire-of-life.

But the task it had set for itself was not an easy one; the house had been winterized with typical Yankee thoroughness. Caulk had been applied around every window and door frame, and a long, even bead had been drawn at the juncture where clapboarding met foundation. Cracks in the masonry had been plastered over, and every window was double-paned and covered over with storm windows, every door had weatherstripping.

It circled the house without finding entrance. The building was tight, invulnerable to it. There might be entrances up above—experience said it was likely to find chimney pots and furnace exhausts, gable vents, even the occasional hatchway—but it dared not climb the house side, up into the swirling, shifting snow, where matter and sky intermingled. It could not have been sure of maintaining its orientation, of knowing where the house left off and the air began. It was madness to even consider it.

Time and again it lashed silently around the house, skimming the surface of the snow, leaving behind it the very thinnest layer of ice, a trail that disappeared almost instantaneously under the new falling snow. It was perilously exposed, and this added to its confusion and desperation, to its determination to try *anything,* no matter how rash or foolhardy, that might help it to survive.

Even after Desmond had finally bowed to the inevitable and taken Candy's corpse out to the El Dorado, where it could await the snowplows and the doctor and the coroner in the preserving cold, there was an eerie pall cast over the house. Jennifer had been put to bed early, and the adults had retired to the kitchen, to try to talk.

But there was nothing to say. There was no way Candy could have died, and speculation would not explain the inexplicable—only the autopsy could do that. And she was a stranger, so there could be no reminiscences about her, none that Alma Kingsley would care to have Desmond share, anyway. So, in the end, they simply fell silent. Mrs. Kingsley began going through her cookbooks, and Desmond fell to punching listlessly on the keys of his calculator.

"What is wrong with that dog?" Alma Kingsley grumbled in exasperation. Iago was pacing the kitchen floor, infinitely restless, his claws going click-click-click on the linoleum. Now he was at the door again, pushing at the crack between door and sill with his nose, digging at it hopelessly with his claws, scratching and whining.

"Sounds like he wants to be let out," Desmond said without looking up.

"Well, maybe I should," she said at last. Throwing a wrap over herself, she

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took hold of Iago's collar, and led him to the door. Her intent was to shove his nose outside and give him a whiff of the cold, and then draw him back in again. That ought to have settled his restlessness. But when the door opened, he strained forward, barking furiously, even anxiously, and she saw something outlined on the snow in the rectangle of light cast by the open door. She squinted and said, "Desmond, come here. Take a look at this."

The dog's feet scrabbled wildly on the floor, but her grip was firm. "Look at what?" Desmond said. He ambled up, calculator in hand, and peered over her shoulder. "That's just a patch of shadow."

"There never was a patch of shadow shaped like that there *before*," Mrs. Kingsley said dubiously. A momentary twinge of arthritis hit her then, and her hold on Iago's collar loosened.

All hell broke loose.

It lay watching, not knowing that it did not blend in against the snow, assuming that the sophonts' awareness would be as dazzled by the downfalling flakes as was its own.

It had flattened against the snow's surface the instant that the door opened with a great outrushing of warmth. The shifts of ionization and static charges in the air made the doorway a shimmering beacon, bright and inviting, and only the faint, almost undetectable flickers of fire-of-life within that wash of liquid warmth kept it from leaping forward at that very instant. Wary, it crouched, waiting.

Then the dog came flying through the air to attack it.

The beast was large and fierce, plowing through and scattering snow, howling and barking as it came. Terrified, the creature fled, but—cunning, desperate—it fled straight for the door, risking everything on a frontal attack, a savage, killing assault on whatever might lie in its path.

In the doorway, the black beast ravening and almost upon it, its perception cleared, and it found that only two enemies stood between it and shelter. The first fell aside, shrinking back against the wall as it charged forward, and it could ignore her, making for the second who was just beyond her, and who was bigger, with more fire-of-life in him.

Berserk, it sprang at the man, who stumbled back, involuntarily flinging up a hand to fend it off. There was an object in that hand, a glittering complex of resistance paths that held a shimmering, shifting structure of energies, a vastly simplified and purified version of what lay within living beings.

A concept came searing up from the shuttered and forbidden parts of its mind, breaking through the pain: WEAPON! WEAPON! WEAPON! and it turned in midair, reshaping its structure and seizing hold of a wall so that it slammed aside and away from the thing. The beast leaped up after it, and for an instant almost had it, and then it fled down the hall and away.

In terror and wild confusion it was driven through several rooms and up a stairway. It took the first opening off of the hall it could find, and discovered itself in a cul-de-sac, the air all abuzz with jittery white energy, and dominated by a large, painful glow in its center.

The beast halted, hackles rising. It was cornered, and the beast knew it.

"What was *that?*" Desmond gasped.

Alma Kingsley shook her head. Her breath was still short, her face felt pallid with shock, and she discovered that she was clutching at her heart. Disdainful of her own weakness, she forced the hand down. Then, looking up at

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where Iago's frantic baying had come to an abrupt stop, she felt seized with terror and cried, "Jennifer!"

Desmond easily outdistanced her, but she arrived in the guest bedroom practically on his heels. To her unutterable relief, the child was unharmed, sitting up sleepily in her bed and looking at the frantic Iago with dull, unfocused interest. Her father swept her up in a hug, and backed away, into the hallway. Oddly enough, Alma Kingsley felt a pang of jealousy.

Iago had cornered the creature.

Whatever it was—and in the gloom it was all but invisible—it crouched in the shadows to the far side of the four-poster, alert and quivering, frightened and dangerous. It reared up and slowly dipped down as Iago darted forward, then back, then forward again, growling and making little feinting attacks. The combination of quick and mazy movements made the fight look like a confrontation between cobra and mongoose.

The creature was trapped in the aisle between bed and wall. To its rear was a closet, its door open on a thick-packed rank of summer dresses in their plastic dry-cleaning bags. Jennifer's jumper hung by itself on a hook on the back of the door.

Mrs. Kingsley was just reaching—belatedly, she realized—for the light switch when Iago attacked. Snapping and foaming, he charged. The two went tumbling, one over the other. Shaking his head fiercely, Iago backed out of the narrow way, dragging the creature out between his jaws, struggling.

Iago snarled savagely as he tore at the creature, and then there was an ozone crackle in the air and he yelped, a high, heartbreaking cry. His stiffening body crashed over sideways, onto the floor, and did not move.

The creature disentangled itself instantly, feinted at Desmond, then turned again and—going carefully around rather than over the bed—rushed into the closet.

There was an access panel in the back of the closet. It had been installed early in the century, when the upstairs water closet was retrofitted, and opened into the wall and a few dusty pipes. The panel was ajar slightly, leaning loosely rather than snugly. Perhaps the child had been playing with it, looking for a secret passageway, or perhaps it had been left partly open for years or even decades without anyone ever bothering to get around to straightening it.

The creature squeezed through the crack, quick and impossibly fluid, and disappeared into the wall.

Slowly, awkwardly, Mrs. Kingsley squatted down, knees almost touching the floor. She laid a hand on her dog's head. He was dead. "Oh, Iago," she said. "My little *bête noire*."

She began to cry.

The house was a maze of electric circuits and appliances. They dizzied and blinded it, dazzling and baffling its senses. The sophonts were somewhere within this maze, and it did not even know how many they were. It only knew that they had not followed it, and thus presumably *could* not. But the sophonts' lair was a dangerous environment, naturally hostile to it, and it fled.

It fled deep, sinking downward by instinct, tracing a tortuous way between walls and floors, sometimes following water pipes, and always avoiding electrical wires. Carefully, fearfully, it threaded its way along a twisty path that led downward, ever downward.

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Finally it emerged into warm, cavernous darkness, and knew that it had found refuge.

Iago was dead, but Jennifer was alive; there was comfort in that. The faithful old family retainer had given up his life in defense of home and child, and that was somehow fitting. It was the way things ought to be. His corpse was outside the kitchen door now, packed in snow because the frozen earth made burial impossible, but Alma Kingsley vowed that her great-grandchildren would know his name.

The snow had finally stopped, and the night was clear, and bitterly cold, the stars burning in it like chips of ice. The great glowing, shimmering, billowing curtains of the Northern Lights were out, shifting restlessly back and forth on the horizon, brighter than she had ever seen them, so bright that it almost seemed that she could burn her hand on them, if she held it out to the sky.

It had been quite a storm. It must have dumped at least four feet of snow on the region all told, snowing through the night and through the day and through most of the night again, and the driveway beyond the lee of the house was buried under huge drifts; you couldn't even see the highway at its end. So much for her first thought, which was to bundle them all into Desmond's car and make a run for it, abandoning the house to the creature until they could come back later with help. To get the hell *out* of here!

But with all that snow, nobody was going anywhere, life-or-death emergency or not, until the snowplow came by in the morning. It was physically impossible. And if they locked themselves in the car as a refuge—her second thought—they'd freeze to death before daybreak. And besides, who was to say that it couldn't get into the car after them, the way it seemed to be able to squeeze itself through the smallest of cracks?

"Did you notice that it was afraid of my pocket calculator?" Desmond asked. He was pacing the length of the kitchen, back and forth, from the pantry door to the wooden cot they had set up for Jennifer by the refrigerator. "And it wouldn't touch the electric blanket either."

"Why is that?" Mrs. Kingsley asked without interest. Her granddaughter was sleeping like an angel, and her heart pounded with fear for the child. She had to fight down the impulse to run a rough old hand over hair so fine it could break your heart.

"I don't know, but did you see the way it squeezed into the wall? Like it was boneless, or something more than boneless. I'll bet it doesn't mass much of anything at all!"

He was getting excited now. Alma Kingsley simply tuned out his voice and let him rant on. Stephanie had always said that problem-solving was his *forte,* what he was most at home with. Given a logic problem—a crossword puzzle or a program that had crashed—and some shred of clue, his intuition would worry it to death or solution. To Alma Kingsley's way of thinking, this was a good argument that problem-solving logic was not one of the civilized skills.

It was only when he moved her brand new toaster-oven to the kitchen table and began disassembling it that she was finally moved to object. "Just what the hell do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

"I'm going to wrap a resistance coil," he said, absorbed in his chore and talking so fast his words ran together. "Look, this thing is obviously sensitive to electromagnetic radiation, right? Now, assuming its shape is maintained

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through bound charges, then it would move by shifting electrical potential within itself. That would explain how it moves so fluidly. So—"

"Desmond," she said, her patience wearing thin, "just what are you trying to do?"

He looked up from his work, puzzled. "I'm building a signal-interrupter. Didn't I make myself clear?" Without waiting for a response, he bent back down over the table, uncoiling wires from the heating elements.

She closed her eyes, calmed herself. "Just what will this signal-interrupter do when it's built?"

"Well, basically—" He broke something out of the toaster-oven, glanced at it, threw it aside. "Basically, it ought to render this creature totally immobile anywhere within—oh, let's say a fifteen-twenty foot radius. More, probably, but that much at least."

For the first time in her life, Alma Kingsley wondered if God might not have had reasons for creating Desmond. "You can do this?" she asked anxiously. "Tonight?"

He favored her with a vulgar, lopsided grin. "Old hoss," he said, "give me half an hour, and we have got it dicked!"

With no warning, all the lights went out at once, plunging them into complete darkness.

"Oh shit," Desmond said.

Calmly, because she'd been through blackouts before, Mrs. Kingsley felt and twisted the knobs on the gas range. One by one the burners came on, filling the room with an eerie, flickering light.

By sheer bad luck, the furnace was off at the instant the power went. It was a gas furnace, but it operated off of a solid state programmable electric thermostat, and wouldn't go back on again until the thermostat told it to. But it wasn't really crucial; she lit the oven, leaving the door open for heat.

After some clumsy, fearful rummaging through the dark pantry, she unearthed a hurricane lamp. Its chimney had gulls painted on the side, and the transparent reservoir was filled with blue scented soil. Still, when she set it on the kitchen table, the light it shed was warm and friendly, and she could turn off the range.

Desmond, meanwhile, had found the utility flashlight in its recharger bracket by the basement door. He stood in the middle of the pantry, flicked it on and off, and then said, "What does this house have—fuses or circuit breakers?"

Alma Kingsley stared at the man in disbelief. His face was dark with shadow, his eyes lost in blackness. He was a silhouette creature, almost all outline and no substance, one hand on the doorknob of the cellar door. "Desmond, this isn't the city. A power line is down. Going into the cellar and flicking a switch is not going to restore the electricity."

She didn't have to be able to see the face to know the smug, superior smile that crossed it now; she could hear it in his voice. "Let's not get all worked up, now. *Maybe* a line is down. But the more likely reason is that a power transient has kicked out the main circuit breaker. There's no reason for us to spend a night in the cold and dark when just a moment's effort can restore the power." He opened the door.

She peered past him, down into the cellar—it was a perfect, lightless black. Vague colors swam before her, visual hallucinations brought up by the absolute lack of light. The blackness crawled with menace. The only sound anywhere was the hissing of the gas oven.

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Involuntarily, she clutched his arm. "For God's sake, Desmond, you don't know what's down there!"

Desmond turned the flashlight on her face. She stood blinking as he studied her. "Don't be such a wuss," he said. "Whatever that thing is, we know that it's somewhere *above* us, not below."

He shook free of her grip and moved to the top of the cellar steps, hesitated for a moment, looking down. "Desmond," she said, so frightened that she found herself actually pleading, "this is *unwise*. You're acting like a character in a monster movie! Everybody in the theater would be yelling 'Don't go down there!' by this point. Stay up here with us. We need you here." It galled her to speak the words, words she'd never imagined she'd hear herself say—but it was true.

Desmond turned his head to look back at her, and grimaced. "Look," he said, a defensive note creeping into his voice, "this thing *kills* people, and it's on the loose. The only defense we have against it uses electricity. Either I go down there and reset the breakers, or we sit up here in the dark and wait to die." After a second of silence, he grinned at her, the arrogance, the boundless self-confidence and self-assurance she'd always found so odious in the man already returning to his face after a fleeting moment of uncertainty. "Beside, I'll be quick . . . and I'll be careful!"

He was wrong, horribly wrong, but she didn't have the arguments to confute him with, only a horrid assurance that he was making a stupid move. Desmond shone the flash down the stairs.

A thin line of worn wooden treads led downward into darkness, a trace of light glimmering on the walls to either side. When Desmond raised the flash slightly, a pale circle formed on the whitewashed rock wall just beyond the landing. "Damn," he muttered. "I don't suppose the circuit box is on the near wall?"

"No, it's on the wall opposite, at the front of the house."

Abruptly, Desmond turned and walked back into the kitchen. For a giddy moment, Mrs. Kingsley thought he had come to his senses. But he only paused by his daughter and gently placed something on the cot beside her sleeping head. The calculator. He switched it on, then turned back toward the cellar.

"For the love of Christ, Desmond!"

But, ignoring her completely, he stepped down onto the top stair. It groaned under his weight. Slowly he descended, clutching the loose railing with his free hand. The light danced and bobbed on the basement wall, growing brighter as he approached, then darting to the side and disappearing as he turned away. Briefly, there was the faintest shimmer of reflected light, and then nothing.

The air from below was warm, like an animal's breath on her face. Staring down into the liquid blackness, Mrs. Kingsley felt her every nerve on end. She strained to hear, to track her son-in-law's progress below by sound alone. But the dirt floor muffled his footsteps, and damped down the noise he made.

"Desmond?" she said softly. He did not answer. Her own breath sounded loud to her; she could make out nothing above it. It was uncanny how silent the cellar was. It was as if the darkness were a gigantic beast that moved on soft paws to swallow up the least sound.

Then Desmond stumbled into a pile of cardboard boxes filled with old paint and coffee cans that she had put away years ago against some possible future need. A jar fell to the floor. He kicked it angrily, and it skittered and skipped away to shatter against the wall. "Fuck."

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Mrs. Kingsley leaned down into the stairway. The darkness was so deep, so absolute, it seemed to want to suck her down into it. It welled up dizzyingly about her, and she had to put out a hand to steady herself against the jamb.

Silence again. Then—

"Found it!" Desmond shouted. He sounded relieved; one presumed the darkness had finally gotten to him. There were faint noises as he poked about. "Jeez, this is an old system. Look at the rust on it! I'll bet you ten to one I—"

He gasped.

The flashlight clattered noisily to the ground. For an instant there was silence, complete and profound. Then a kind of throbbing electrical hum rose to fill the darkness. Over the throbbing came other sounds, choking and thrashing sounds, as if Desmond were having a seizure. The noise went on and on.

And then it stopped.

The silence seemed to echo, like the air just after a great bell has been stilled. Fearfully, Alma Kingsley called down, "Desmond? Desmond, are you all right?" She waited, and heard nothing. "Desmond?"

A faint slithering noise whispered up from below. It wasn't quite like anything she had ever heard before, and yet it definitely came from a living creature. It was coming from the far side of the cellar, and it was headed right for the stairway.

Frantically, she slammed the door shut, and backed away, into the warmth and light of the kitchen. For an instant's frozen horror, she was convinced it would follow her. But it did not.

"Gamma?"

Jennifer was sitting up in bed, sleepily rubbing one eye. It was clear that the door slamming had wakened her. "Gamma," she said. "Where's Daddy?"

It had fled as far as it could, as deep as it was possible to go in this labyrinthine structure, and had thought itself safe. It badly needed to think things through, as a dozen conflicting emotions chased themselves through its neural fabric, and at that point wanted only solitude, darkness, stillness, the security of enclosure. But then, terrifyingly, one of the sophonts had come *after* it, tracking it down, coming relentlessly closer and closer and closer, a buzzing electrical device that emitted a spray of photons—a weapon?—in one hand. It had backed away in terror, retreating as the man came on toward it step by step, finally stopping only when it backed up against a solid wall and there was no place left to go without turning and exposing its back to a potentially fatal attack.

Still the man came implacably on, ever closer, ponderous steps shaking the floor like thunder, looming huge and heavy and menacing, only a few body-lengths away now. At last, still moving forward, the sophont turned the stream of photons from its device/weapon directly *on* it. . . .

Trapped, terrified, knowing that it might only have seconds of life left in which to act, it struck. The sophont jerked and thrashed and flailed, the electrical device flying from its hand to shatter against the floor and go out.

It had tried its best to avoid this confrontation, had not wanted to kill again so soon, had wanted to think about the whole situation, but it had been given no choice.

None of those considerations kept it from feeding as fully as it could, of

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course, now that it *had* killed. The sophont was big and vigorous, in the prime of its cycle of existence, and was full of the fire-of-life.

When it had finished with him, it felt refreshed and somewhat calmer . . . although, almost immediately, a new unease began to grow within it. This was a bad situation, trapped inside a structure like this with a band of sophonts, all alerted to its presence. It was a dangerous situation, one in which it could easily be trapped or attacked—and there was something *else* about the situation that dimly troubled it, something other than the danger, something that generated another kind of unease. It shouldn't be hunting sophonts, it knew that somehow, not unless it had no other choice. It should find other, easier, less dangerous prey, like the rats and squirrels and birds it'd found in the park. To find nonsophont prey instead would be far less dangerous, and it would *also* be, it would also be . . . something. Something it no longer had the concept for, but which it vaguely knew was desirable.

Yes, it should leave here, get out of this situation altogether.

So it hunted through the structure until it found access to a metal pipe that it followed up through the walls and out onto the roof, out into the chill outer air. . . . But there were the Northern Lights, blazing above it, filling the sky, curtains of dancing, shimmering radiation, seemingly only a few feet above its head, dazzling it, making it squirm and caper and thrash, coil and uncoil and coil, scribing odd cabalistic patterns in the snow . . . until, on the verge of total madness, it retreated back into the pipe, plunging deep into the reassuringly solid structure of the house, where at least the sheer mass of all the stone and wood and iron afforded it some protection against the shifting, chaotic, maddening lights in the sky.

It had to stay here. It had no choice.

The grandmother clock in the upstairs hallway chimed midnight, a soft, homey noise. The house was still, and the kitchen was warm. The thing in the basement—whatever it was—still had not come out. Mrs. Kingsley dared to hope that it would not, that it was holed up in the cellar for good, and would not willingly emerge. Her granddaughter was asleep again, and she was alone with her fear and her guilt.

"He's gone to town to get a snowplow," she had lied. It was moral cowardice, pure and simple, and she knew that she would never be able to completely forgive herself for it. But by the same token, there was no way she could possibly have told the child the truth. Not now. Not in the state she was in. "He'll be back in the morning, after breakfast."

"Oh." Jennifer's head had sunk back to the pillow then. She turned to the side, closed her eyes, and was asleep. A faint green glow from the calculator's display tinged her face.

Alma Kingsley stood motionless. Now that she listened, she could hear the house talking to itself. It creaked and groaned, making wooden noises like doors opening and shutting in a distant, fairy-tale wood. Ghosts walked the halls with slow, ominous tread.

She was afraid. Her heart was beating rapidly, and her limbs felt weak and drained. Her house—her own house!—loomed dark and menacing on all sides, and she was afraid of it.

She needed a weapon. The gizmo Desmond had been working on was nowhere near done, a tangle of wires and trash. Even with the power on, she would have no idea how to finish it herself. Desmond had said the monster was afraid of electricity, but with the power out, all the electronic equipment

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she owned, the television, the radios, the microwave, the food processor, were dead, and so the idea of surrounding them with a barricade of such things, all turned on, wasn't going to work. The electric blanket was useless as a defense now too. There weren't any firearms in the house, and she doubted a kitchen knife would be much use against the creature. Struck by sudden quick inspiration, she stepped into the mudroom to the side of the kitchen door and opened the narrow door of the utility closet. There was a heavy woodchopper's ax there, set on brackets on the wall, behind a jumble of brooms, old vacuum cleaners, saws, rakes, and other junk, where it had rested untouched for years, since her hands had gotten too bad to let her chop her own wood for the winter.

She fumbled the ax down from its brackets, lugged it into the kitchen—marveling ruefully at how *heavy* it now seemed, how much arm-strength she'd lost in only five or six years—and set it down near Jennifer's cot, handle up, leaning against the wall.

It wasn't enough. The ax might make for a secondary, last-ditch line of defense if the thing got into the kitchen, but she was too weak and stiff and arthritic to wield it with any real vigor or competence anymore, and the idea of taking slow, clumsy strokes at a creature that moved as fast as this one did, in a half-darkened room that was dancing with shadows anyway, made her mouth dry with terror. That wasn't good enough. She had to figure out some way to keep it out of the kitchen in the first place.

How to do that? How to keep it out of here, keep it away from Jennifer? Think, damn it, *think!*

The only thing she *knew* it feared was Desmond's pocket calculator.

That was a start, then. She darted into the darkened parlor and snagged a long, white taper from the candelabra on the mantelpiece. With a shiver, she retreated back to the kitchen. She wrapped several paper napkins around its base to protect her hand against the drippings. Desmond would have more calculators among his effects—he was simply that kind of person. There might even be one among Jennifer's things. And for that matter, there was her own, tucked away in the upstairs china cabinet, which she used periodically for taxes and bills.

The candle shed very little light; it seemed to blind her more than illumine the way. She hesitated in the doorway and the shadows flickered and waved about her like living things. She did not want to go into the dark.

Holding herself straight, she stepped forward, fighting against panic.

Desmond had brought along two more calculators, and Jennifer one, a child's calculator in the shape of an owl, the readout part of its big round eyes. Among the child's things, too, she had found a pocket computer game—Meteor Defense, or some such nonsense—and estimating it similar enough to be of use, that brought the total up to six. Five, if you *didn't* count it.

It had been a harrowing expedition. She had started at every creak of the joists or scream of stairway tread underfoot. She had felt the Dark Angel upon her twice, as the shadow in an empty doorway had shifted toward her, and when the darkness behind a cabinet gathered itself up to leap. As she returned downstairs and into the parlor, her pace quickened. The kitchen beckoned.

It so heartened her to reach safe haven that she began to hum a snatch of Mozart. She was alive! She blew out the candle and dumped the calculators onto the kitchen table. For the moment, she didn't even notice the thing crouching in the hallway.

A sudden sense of foreboding, a prickling, crawling sensation, made her

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spin about. Something moved just outside the kitchen door. Black crawled within black, shadow in shadow.

It yearned forward slightly, then retreated, bobbing up and down in indecision, torn between flight and attack. Mrs. Kingsley couldn't even see it clearly, but she *felt* it studying the sleeping child.

More from panic than courage, then, she ran at the thing wildly. She slashed her arm as if the calculator in it were an ax, and she could use it to chop the thing into bloody bits, its black ichor steaming onto the floor, eating through the carpet.

It hesitated fractionally, then flowed into darkness and was gone.

Mrs. Kingsley sobbed in the doorway, weak and despairing. It was a victory, but a minor one. The thing was still loose, and with every encounter it was losing fear.

She set calculators by the doors to the pantry, hallway, and parlor. The fourth she put by the window, and the little computer game was laid at the foot of Jennifer's cot as a second line of defense. They all glowed gently.

The oil lamp was running low. Mrs. Kingsley blew it out, to conserve what little fuel remained, and twisted on two of the range burners. She felt oddly secure, surrounded by the arcane little devices, with their crisp little lights. She felt safe, protected. It was probably unwarranted, mere blind faith in technology, but . . .

The calculator by the parlor door began blinking. The numbers had disappeared and there was a single dot tracking its way across the readout. She remembered Desmond bragging about the thing, when he first showed it to her, explaining that if it weren't used for some number of minutes—five? twenty? ten?—the numbers disappeared from the readout, though the memory still held them, and it went into an energy-conserving mode. And then, if more time went by and nobody used it, it simply turned itself off.

Hastily, she punched some figures at random, and hit a function button. The numbers came back on, with that funny little symbol that meant that an error had been made. She ignored it.

It wasn't long before she realized that the calculators were not going to do. Three of them kept blinking off, and one of the others was failing, its batteries low. She couldn't keep punching the things through the night—sleep would take her long before the snowplow came.

Think! she told herself fiercely. She had to kill the thing, to electrocute it somehow . . . She remembered a story Stephanie used to tell, about the summer camp she'd stayed at as a child, a place with an old-fashioned crank phone system.

The girls used to hook up a phone with one wire connected to a metal bed frame, then the other to a wad of aluminum foil. When the victim sat down on the bed frame, one girl would toss her the ball of foil and yell "Catch!" while her accomplice gave the phone a vicious crank.

She didn't have a crank phone, of course, but she sensed she was on the right track. She'd found a trap that wouldn't require much mechanical skill to set up. All she needed was a power source. Something like . . .

Something like an automobile battery.

She dressed hurriedly, making plans all the while.

First, she got the jumper cables out of the El Dorado's trunk, leaving it up and open behind her as she hurried them through the snow to the kitchen.

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Jennifer was still asleep, and this time Mrs. Kingsley didn't try to keep from stroking her hair. The simple act seemed to fill her with resolve. The creature would not get the child. This she swore.

Again she stepped out into the storm. The car's front door balked at first, frozen with the cold. She yanked harder and it popped open.

Candy stared up at her accusingly. The dead girl's face was grotesquely shrunken in upon itself, and the tightening skin had pulled the eyes wide open. Mrs. Kingsley gasped involuntarily. She had forgotten the macabre thing was there, stretched out across the front seat.

But there was no time for squeamishness. She leaned over the corpse, and fumbled under the steering wheel for the hood release. With a *bing,* the hood unlatched and she went around to the front—slamming the door shut behind her—to raise it up and confront the battery.

She was fiddling with the cables—they were cold, of course, and frozen to the terminals, and corroded over as well—when her hands seized up with arthritis again. Vainly she tried to *force* her mittened hands to close about a cable. Pain shot up her arms, but still her hands did not respond. Frustrated, she slammed them against the cables again and again.

The lines wouldn't budge.

Tears built at the corners of her eyes, but sternly she suppressed them, blinking them down, thinking harsh thoughts at herself. There had to be a way—the trunk! She'd left it open, hadn't she? She hurried around back and it was true, the trunk still gaped wide. She rummaged about with her useless arms, pushing things to one side or another as if they were long sticks she was using to poke with, and at last she found what she was looking for. A tire iron.

It took longer to scoop up the iron than she'd have liked, an awkward, nightmarishly clumsy time, but finally she had it, and scuttled back to the battery. Holding the iron as a Punchinello might hold its bashing-stick, she tried again and again, leaning, putting her weight *just so,* until finally the one cable popped loose and went banging against the engine.

Time was all. Mrs. Kingsley tried hard not to think of Jennifer lying alone in the house, at the center of her protective pentagram of failing calculators, tried hard to put blind, unreasoning faith in the flimsy little Oriental-built machines.

It took a hellishly long time to get the iron in position for the second cable, and then it kept slipping out of the way. But at last she pried that one free of its terminal too, and with a feeling of triumph, she let the iron fall. She reached for the battery.

It would not budge.

She couldn't get her hands around the damnable thing, couldn't get a hold on it, probably didn't even have the strength to lift it.

She *did* cry then, the tears running down her cheeks and the thin trail of moisture freezing on her skin with a faint crackling sensation. But even then she did not give up. Her mind kept working, as she stared with a positive hatred at the battery. There was nothing in the workings of the car touching it, she noted, and nothing beneath it. There was a space of an inch or so around it on three sides, and it was set on a kind of little metal ledge.

If not for that ledge, the battery would fall to the ground.

She set out to break the little shelf, battering and prying at it with the tire iron. Time and again the iron slipped from her hands and fell. She had to get to her knees in the snow, and reach around under the car to make it fall flat,

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and then draw it out from under and seduce it into her arms again—she lost a lot of time that way.

By now her knees and her arms, up to her shoulders, were numbed and bruised. The cold seemed to soak through to her bones, and she knew she was running a bad risk of frostbite.

But at last she managed to poke and pry and stab enough that, with a sudden ripping noise, the battery was gone. It had fallen to the ground.

She still couldn't lift it up from the snow—not for more than a few seconds at a time, anyway. But she could get the thing back to the house by pushing it, if she was willing to crawl.

Slowly, with distaste, she got down to the ground. Sometimes a woman had to crawl.

It was more with disbelief than with joy that she finally shoved the battery onto the linoleum of the kitchen floor. Leaving it on its side, she slowly stood and sank gratefully into a chair. Her knees were afire. The creature could have come and taken her then, and she'd have felt only gratitude. It would be so very pleasant to simply lean back and fall asleep. . . .

Something creaked. Panicked, she struggled upright, twisting around to see that Jennifer was still all right. Her father's calculator had slipped to the floor as the child shifted in her sleep. Of the guardian calculators at the doors, only one was still blinking.

Hurriedly she punched new life into the calculators, bringing the green alphanumerics swimming up to their surfaces. There could be no sleep for her. She still had work to do, a trap to set.

But desire would not unclench her hands. She thrust them into her armpits, desperately trying to warm the joints into movement. It didn't work. She was stopped before she could begin.

Finally she knelt by her granddaughter's cot and nudged her ever so gently. "Rise and shine, sweetheart," she murmured. "Grandmother needs you to be her hands."

Jennifer was sleepy and balky. It took a great deal of coaxing just to get her to untangle the jumper cables. Then, when they were stretched out to their ten-foot lengths, side by side like orange vinyl snakes, it was time to assemble the trap.

Fortunately the cables were old, and the clips were not as taut as they might be. Even at that, Jennifer had to use both hands and all her strength to open the grippers enough to clamp them onto a battery terminal. The first two times she tried, they slipped right back off. Mrs. Kingsley merely tightened her lips and said, "Again."

"Why?"

A noise came from the parlor, a faint, whispery slithering sound. Mrs. Kingsley threw back her head, listening, but it was gone. "Just *do* it. I'm your grandmother." She put all the authority she had in her voice, and, for a wonder, the child obeyed.

As soon as the connection was firm, and wouldn't come loose at a tug on the cable, she threw a tea towel over the terminal, to protect her grandchild against accidental shock. "That's good," she said. "Now the other one."

"This is dumb!" Jennifer cried rebelliously. "I don't have to if I don't want to!"

"By God, I'll give you don't-have-to!" Mrs. Kingsley angrily lifted a hand

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shoulder-high to slap the child. Then, at the look in her eyes, she stopped, and bit back her anger. She crouched down, joints hurting horribly, and hugged Jennifer to her. "I know it seems hard, child. But sometimes we have to do things we would rather not. It's simply the way the world wags."

Jennifer obstinately shook her head.

"It won't take long, I promise. Suppose that as soon as we get through with this, we make hot chocolate? Would you like that?" She held the child at arm's length, studied her solemnly. "Yes, I'd supposed you would."

The second cable went on smoothly, and Jennifer enjoyed making the ball of aluminum foil. Alma Kingsley had to stop her from using up all that was on the roll.

"Now pretend that the cable is an alligator, and make it bite the shiny ball." It took Jennifer three tries, and then she got it right. The final step was to hook the other cable to something large and metallic, something that the creature would have to touch or pass over to get at her. This was less satisfactory than the rest. The nearest bed frame was on the second floor. She could no more have dragged it down into the kitchen than she could have hauled the battery up the stairs to it. In the end, the best she could find was a screen window that had been stored in the pantry against spring.

The screen was wire mesh, not the modern plastic stuff, but after Jennifer had clipped the cable to it, it looked woefully small and inadequate. There was no way of placing it that guaranteed the creature would pass over it, or of being sure it would be touching when she threw the second cable. But it would have to do. Because it was the best she could come up with.

"Gamma, we can make hot chocolate now, right?"

She allowed herself a smile. "No, my young apprentice. *You* will make the cocoa. Your grandmother will supervise. Have you ever made cocoa all by yourself before?"

Jennifer shook her head, eyes wide and solemn.

"Well! This will be a special occasion, then. The first thing to do is to—"

The cocoa was a smashing success. By the time it was made, Jennifer was nodding and yawning again. She only managed to drink half her mug's contents before her head slumped over onto her shoulder. Mrs. Kingsley led her back to the cot, and pulled the blankets up over her.

The trap was not good enough. It needed . . . something more. Mrs. Kingsley thought the problem through as she put the cocoa-stained saucepan in the sink and ran a little water in it for it to soak. The drain was closed and water built up in the sink.

Inspiration struck her then.

She turned the tap all the way over, and stood back to watch the sink fill up and brim over. Water crept out onto the formica countertop, and slopped over onto the floor in a thin, ragged sheet. It splattered and spread, a widening puddle on the linoleum. Soon everything on the floor—including the screen window—was damp.

Success! She stepped through the spreading water and gathered up the calculators. Climbing up on a chair, she sat down on the kitchen table itself, resting her feet on the chair's cane seat. She didn't know much about electricity, but she knew that this would insulate her from the shock. In the same way, the cot's wooden legs would protect Jennifer.

The water was spreading into the pantry and the hallway, seeping through the floorboards, being sopped up by the Oriental carpets in the parlor. The

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damage it was doing to her house was incalculable. But she kept the water flowing. As long as the one cable was solidly grounded in the water, the entire kitchen was a death-trap for the creature.

One by one, she turned off the calculators, stacking them beside her. She rested the ball of foil in her lap, ready to throw. Let the monster come! She was prepared for it.

She only wished she had thought to brew some tea for the wait.

Time passed with excruciating slowness. She kept squinting at her watch, thinking that an hour had gone by, to find that it had only been a minute or two instead.

Where *was* it? she thought, straining to hear, although she knew that it could move almost without sound. What was it up to? What was it doing?

What was it doing *here*, for that matter? Here in this house, here on this *planet?* For it was obvious to her by now that the creature was not of this Earth. What did it *want?* Why had it come? Was it just a blindly ravening, mindless creature, a simple predator, or did it have some kind of plan, some sort of purpose?

Conquest, probably. Invasion. That was the most likely guess. Perhaps it was a scout for some sort of interstellar invasion force. A spy, a saboteur, a guerrilla fighter, a stealthy terrorist. A soldier.

The thought made her feel very tired. Even out among the stars, it seemed, they had soldiers, and wars, and armies, and waged campaigns of conquest. The fighting never stopped, the killing never stopped, no matter where in the universe you went. There was no escaping it.

She blinked back sudden tears, and steeled herself to increased alertness. This time she was drawing her own line in the sand. It was *not* going to get Jennifer. This time she was going to fight the blank black grinding forces of the universe to a standstill. She was going to kill the loathsome thing, right here and now.

Come on, you abomination. Come for me!

Come *on*. . . .

The weapons were gone! The sophonts had disarmed themselves, rendered themselves unprotected, unguarded . . . helpless. And yet, such an action was contrary to everything it somehow knew—without quite knowing *how* it knew—about the nature of sophonts. It felt the contradiction as an almost physical assault.

It was baffled and terrified. The imperatives of survival demanded that it attack and kill the two remaining sophonts. Yet they were alerted and prepared, waiting for it in a space that had but one approach, and *whatever* they had done with their weapons, it was not fooled into thinking they were not dangerous. They were waiting for it.

It quivered in darkness, mantle involuntarily expanding and contacting with conflicting urges, making little retreating and advancing movements, paralyzed with indecision and fear. It was in an impossible position. It felt the wrongness, though it had no way of understanding it. It should not be here, it knew, should not be playing this dangerous game in such alien surroundings. This was not how it was meant to be. . . .

Finally, though, it came to the only decision it could: it must attack.

If it was to act, it would have to act fast. The sophonts would not remain passive forever. In what pitiable remnants of its mapping functions remained accessible, it created a model of the house, a one-to-one visualization of its

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every wall and surface, from the patterned tin ceiling of the master bedroom to the uneven dirt floor of the basement. There were lacunae within its knowledge of the house, but they did not matter; it knew those portions that it would employ. Within this small maze, it set a marker to represent itself.

It plotted its attack by moving the signifier. Silently, craftily, it would flow up one wall to the juncture of wall and ceiling. Attacking from above was instinctive behavior to its own kind, and it knew from experience that the sophonts here rarely looked up; taken together, these facts just might give it an edge.

Quickly, then, it would traverse wall and ceiling to the kitchen doorway. The room was charged with tensions. The air sparkled with dying by-products of the gas oven, dazzling its senses, so that it perceived the two surviving sophonts with their complex nervous systems as areas of greater brightness within a general glare. It would be entering the room half blind.

The mental marker looped over the archway, sped midway across the ceiling to a spot directly over the smaller brightness. It came to a dead stop, and then dropped.

Time and again, it ran the marker through its mazy path of attack, never varying, until the instructions were scored into its consciousness. It was huddled in upon itself, fringe crackling and humming faintly with the effort. Had its enemy known, she could have walked up to it now and destroyed it without its being able to put up the least resistance. All its energies directed inward, it was temporarily helpless. But that was necessary if it was to imprint its attack, making it a single complex involuntary motion, a spasm of reflex violence that would either succeed all in an instant, or fail before it could regain full consciousness.

One last time, it held the cursor-self over the lesser sophont. Without pausing, it dropped. Fluidly, it stunned, possibly even killed, its first opponent, then leaped straight at the second, to wrap its hood about it, and discharge the powers that freed the fire-of-life. It was a desperate move, and if any least thing went wrong, it would be a fatal one.

When the cursor had run through the final repetition, it was as taut with energy as an overwound spring. It positioned itself carefully. It would take only the slightest triggering thought to free that resolve into a blurred burst of killing fury, an explosion of purpose.

Now!

She must have been dozing. Or perhaps a general stunned weariness had dulled her perceptions, so that she stared blankly unseeing as it entered. Because the first that Alma Kingsley saw of the creature was when it flickered down before her, and on top of Jennifer.

It came too fast. It was upon Jennifer before she could react. There was a sudden moving darkness, like black cloth flapping in the breeze, and then a scorching smell, and the child *screamed!* Then the thing was flying through the air at her, the sides of its mantle spread like manta ray wings, as if it needed that little extra bit of lift to reach her.

She would have died then, had her reflexes not betrayed her. For in the panicked instant when the creature fell through the air before her, all thought stopped, all plans of action and attack abruptly fled and she'd scrambled to her feet, chair falling away, as she twisted to flee from the thing.

Then the creature was soaring through the air at the space where she had been, and it slammed into her upraised hand, the one that held the jumper

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cable with its foolish ball of aluminum foil, as though it were a scepter. The thing's surface had the oddest feel, coarsely textured as if it were made of woven metal and at the same time oddly slick, as if it held some faint charge repulsing her hand. The mantle spread wide, then folded in, seeking to wrap her head in its folds. In blind fear, because she had a dread of suffocation that dated back to her childhood, she flung the creature away.

The thing flew across the kitchen, hit the wall, and fell to the floor. For an instant, it crumpled to practically nothing. Then unseen forces stiffened it and it rose up, swaying slowly and woozily back and forth, looking for all the world like a punch-drunk fighter. For a long moment, they stared at each other.

The thing was resting on the high end of the kitchen, and though the floor was damp there, it was not so deeply puddled as further in, and Mrs. Kingsley didn't know enough about electrical conductivity to know if it was damp enough. "Come on," she grated, holding up the ball of foil as if it were a crucifix she were employing to ward off a vampire. "Just a little bit closer, and I have you!"

She thought of righting the chair and climbing up on it, to protect herself. But she was still wearing her rubber boots, having foreseen the danger and put them on for this very purpose, and surely they ought to be enough. "That's right," she crooned. "Slide forward, into the water."

The creature swayed slightly, back and forth, forth and back, clearly focusing on her. It seemed dazed, unsure. It moved a bit to one side, then to the other, avoiding the edge of the puddle proper.

It *knew!* The vile thing knew to avoid the water! She felt a wave of dread. It was not going to be tricked.

To one side, Jennifer made a soft noise, a gentle, final sigh, and Mrs. Kingsley turned to see the child's head fall to one side. The face was burned and blistered, and the eyes closed. She could see no sign of breathing.

The creature chose that instant to attack. It was upon her before she could throw the cable. Alma Kingsley screamed, and it seemed to some far, remote part of her that there was less terror than rage in her scream, and then she was grappling with the thing. It had leaped through the air, and though she held the cable against its skin, no part of it made contact with the water. The circuit wasn't complete.

Those soft, tough surfaces wrapped about her arms, tried to envelope her head. It covered one eye, and she could not pry it off. Her skin tingled, and she heard the faintest imaginable mechanical-sounding hum, as of a generator starting up just over the horizon.

Very deliberately then, Alma Kingsley decided that if she was not going to survive this encounter, then neither would her enemy. It was the only chance Jennifer had. And at the very worst, at the very least, if her granddaughter was already dead, she could take this hellspawned demon with her, and if vengeance was a sour drink, it was at least a potent one.

Grappling the creature with both hands, she threw herself forward, tumbling them both into the wet, charged floor.

Fire! fear! pain! horror! And then a blinding, ripping, sundering bolt of light, beyond pain and horror, more powerful than anything it had ever known, that ripped the very fabric of the universe apart. That wiped its mind clean like a sponge across a blackboard. And then put it back together again, in an instant.

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* * *

It screamed. Alma Kingsley, lying stunned and spasmed on the linoleum floor, heard it, not with her ears, but deep in her brain, a wash of noise that filled the universe. The creature screamed not as an animal would, not as a being of flesh and blood, backbone and viscera would, but like a machine in agony. Like the scream of stripping gears of some immense but deadlocked engine tearing itself apart with its own energy of motion because it was unable to go forward as it was designed to do, because the load it was pushing against or trying to lift was too great for it to move. Like the high-pitched squeal of distortion, chasing itself up the frequencies, of an electric amplifier just before it burns itself out with a bang and a flash and the stink of burning insulation. Like the boiler of some old-fashioned steam locomotive shrieking out news of its impending death, seconds before the boiler explodes and fills the icy night with twisted scraps of flying black iron. Like that same locomotive plunging off a high trestle into a deep ravine. Like the dopplering scream of an artillery shell or a missile as it falls out of the sky to kill some mother's child. Like the apotheosis of every ugly mechanical sound that had ever been heard since people came down from the trees and learned how to make tools.

It screamed and there was more to that scream than mere pain: there was anguish there too, maybe even—but she was surely making this up—regret. It was a cry from Hell, like that a damned soul might make as it fell down into the Pit, a cry from a soul that knew that it deserved to be damned, and to fall endlessly forever through darkness.

The car battery shorted out. A scorched smell rose from its remains, and a short black puff of smoke curled like a question mark in the air, slowly dissipating. Freed from her grip, the creature flopped, twisted, and streaked for the kitchen window. There was a flare of energy, and the ugly stench of burning wood, paint, and glass. A pane flowed and melted, and, with a dwindling wail, the creature was gone, out into the night.

Cold air blew in through the hole.

Alma Kingsley was still alive, although at first she didn't realize it. She lay there for a long time, listening to someone crying, making baffled little sobbing sounds, *hunnn, hunnn, hunnn,* like a beaten and exhausted animal, and then the cold wind in her face revived her enough that she realized that it was she herself who was making the noise, and that that meant that somehow, impossibly, she was still alive. Sense began to seep back into her head, and the world swam blurrily into focus. She moved, instinctively trying to sit up, and a fierce lance of pain cleared her head a little bit more. She had no conscious memory of the electric shock but it must have been bad, because when she tried to remember, her mind shrank away from the very thought in fear and revulsion.

Snow was blowing in through the window from the wind-drifted dune beyond, fine particles that danced a stately gavotte in the middle of the air. She sat there for a moment longer, sitting in a puddle of water on the floor, cold wet linoleum underneath her, cold air in her face, blinking in bewilderment, staring at the fine particles of snow dancing in the air, staring at the ragged hole melted through the window, wondering what on Earth could have happened . . . and then memory began to return, and with it, fear and horror, rebooting suddenly, kicking in with a sudden shock that flooded her system with adrenaline, as painful and nauseating as a punch in the stomach.

Jennifer. Oh God, Jennifer!

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Somehow, she managed to pull herself to her feet, although the world tilted slowly around her when she did so, first one way and then the other, with ponderous slow-motion grace, as if she were riding a ship in a heavy sea. She staggered toward her granddaughter, falling next to her rather than kneeling, pawing at her with hands that felt like frozen slabs of meat rather than living flesh.

Jennifer was lying still, very still. There was a deep burn across one side of her face, curling up a corner of her mouth, touching the edge of one eye, blistered and cauterized, and all around it the child's flesh was a horrible dead-grey color, as if all the energy and life had been sucked out of her.

She fumbled at Jennifer's throat, trying to find a pulse, unable to tell whether she couldn't find one for the obvious reason or because of her numbed, tingling hands; she could hardly tell whether she was even touching the child without looking to see where her hands were. She leaned close to smell her lips, feeling for even the gentlest whisper of breath from those tiny nostrils, thinking she felt it, unable to be sure.

Without even knowing she'd gotten up or crossed the room, she was at the telephone, fumbling at it, finally getting her hands to pick up the receiver, forgetting entirely that the device was dead—and then, just as she was remembering with a sick surge of dismay that it was dead, she realized it *wasn't.* The dial tone was clear, perfectly normal, as though nothing had ever happened, as though it were a perfectly ordinary day and this a perfectly ordinary call. Somehow she forced her blundering fingers to dial 911. She reached the police with her first attempt and, a flicker of common sense telling her not to babble of monsters, not now, not yet, managed to at least convey that an ambulance was needed out here, that it was a life-or-death emergency, with every second counting . . . although she knew, without them needing to mention it—although they did—that with all the best will in the world it would take some time for an emergency vehicle to force its way through the snow-choked roads to her place.

She stumbled back to the cot, knelt down by her silent, unmoving grandchild. Bits and pieces of first-aid wisdom, learned decades ago at summer camp or half-remembered from television programs she hadn't really been paying much attention to, babbled desperately in her head, and so she tugged the blanket out from under Jennifer's frail, broken little body, wrapping her up in it to keep her warm and keep her from slipping into shock, balled the pillows up and stuffed them under her feet to elevate her legs . . . all the while trying to ignore a cold dry voice in the back of her head, remorselessly logical, that knew perfectly well that all this was useless, and kept whispering, *Too late, too late.* When she could no longer feel any hint of breath, and could no longer feel even the ghost of a pulse—sensation was returning to her hands with a feeling like a thousand hot needles being plunged into them, although she hardly noticed the pain—she began clumsily performing CPR on the child, performing it as well as she could remember how to perform it, anyway, whispering between breaths, "Don't die, don't die, don't die, don't die," like a mantra, trying not to also think *Too late, too late, too late,* like a counter-beat.

At last, she could fool herself no longer, and slowed to a stop. The child looked like a waxwork dummy of herself, all heat and life—the soul, if you believed in those—gone. Her flesh was already growing cold. *Too late.*

Alma Kingsley went away from her body for awhile then. When she came back to it again, returning as though from across a great gulf of space, she

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heard her voice speaking aloud again, mumbling broken fragments of sentences in a sodden monotone, randomly assembled words that jarred and ground against each other like stones in a sack.

A vast surge of bitterness shot through her. Useless old woman. Never good for anything in your whole damn life. Couldn't keep your husband alive, couldn't save your daughter. Couldn't even protect your own grandchild. You'd think if you'd be able to do *anything,* one miserable thing that made a difference in this foul and pestilent existence, that made it worthwhile that you were ever alive in the first place, at least you could save your own granddaughter. A six-year-old child! Why was it that she was dead and *you* were still alive, living on and on into a bleak morning that had no reason left in it for you to be alive anymore, and your traitor lungs continuing to pump, your heart to beat, after Jennifer was dead? After everyone you ever cared about was gone? What was the point? Why couldn't she have been allowed to trade her life for the child's? You old fool, couldn't you have done *one thing* right in your life? In your whole useless and pointless life?

It was bitter and hard for her, almost harder and more cruelly bitter than she could bear, to realize that if Desmond had lived and *she* had been the one to die instead, that Desmond—much as she'd always disliked him, thought him not worthy of her daughter, looked down on him, much as she *still* disliked him now, in spite of the fact that he was dead—probably would have been able to save Jennifer from the monster. To save her as *she* had not been able to. Why hadn't it worked out that way? Why had the fates instead left the child's life in her hands? Her useless, good-for-nothing, crippled hands, that had let that life slip through arthritic fingers?

A draft of cold air. She looked up in time to see the back door swing soundlessly open, letting in a puff and swirl of snow.

A sinister, black, serpentine shape reared up in the doorway, raising the bulk of its length off the ground, like a cobra coiling to strike.

It was back.

The creature was back.

Fear was her first, instinctive reaction, an icy stab of atavistic terror that made her back away a step or two, and which dimly surprised her, since she would have sworn a moment before that she no longer cared at all if she lived or died. Well, in fact, why struggle anymore? Let it kill her. What did it matter *now?* She felt resignation begin to glaze over her like a scum of ice forming over a pond, dulling her fear.

The creature swayed in the doorway. Dawn was beginning to break, the sun not yet over the horizon, but staining the sky a sullen purple-red. The creature was a black silhouette against that sullen red sky, weaving slightly from side to side, rippling sinuously. As yet, it had made no attempt to move forward into the house, to attack her, although she knew how fast it could move. Maybe it was scenting the wind, searching out her presence with whatever strange senses it possessed. . . .

Still it didn't move, as one long moment crawled into the next. Maybe it was *taunting* her, teasing her, playing with her the way a cat plays with a mouse. Enjoying her fear. Making her wait. Relishing her helplessness.

Suddenly, she was furious. The murderous creature was toying with her! Mocking her! Rage instantly melted the ice of resignation and futility. If she was too late to save Jennifer, she could still do one worthwhile thing before she died. She could take this obscenity *with* her. She could make sure that it slaughtered no one else's children.

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She could make it *pay*. Or at least die trying.

The ax was still resting against the wall, where she had put it what seemed like years ago now, handle up, a few feet away from the cot; she could just see it at the edge of her peripheral vision. Without turning, she took a slow, slow sideways step toward it, not looking away from the creature, not turning her head, not daring to do anything that might break the spell of immobility. She took another slow sideways step, and another, inching along like a crab. Slowly, still without turning her head, she stretched her hand back behind her, trying to move her body as little as possible, groping for the ax-handle.

As she touched it, her hand wrapping itself solidly around the wooden handle, the creature spoke to her.

Kill me, it said.

It struggled against the fire! fear! pain! horror! that welled up through its being. But the torrent of voltage, wild and undirected and irresistible, drove its consciousness helplessly before the flood, driving it *through* that protective hedge of forces, through the whitening, searing agony of the unbearable, into memories far worse.

It was falling. Tightly wrapped within a neatly calculated bundle of shielding, its consciousness a pure nub at the center of calming forces, it descended from space, down to the Earth below, at last at the end of a journey that had taken many decades, almost half a century, with the real beginning of its Mission yet ahead. But then—-impossible!—it felt a blast of radiation, raking through the core of its being, scrambling circuits. The shielding was not good enough! It wasn't holding! It knew about the Van Allen radiation belt, of course, and that had been taken into account when the voyage was planned; beings with greater science than even its own race could command had confidently predicted that even if the Van Allen belt were to be energized by a spate of sunspots, the radiation could not possibly be strong enough to get through.

Mistakes happen, though. They were not gods, and neither were any of the other races they knew, however advanced they might be. Sometimes, even with the highest and most subtle of technologies, things go wrong.

The radiation could not get through, and yet it *was* getting through. High-level energies sleeted through the tightly interwoven fabric of its substance, leaving maddening pain in their wake, a hundred, a thousand times more agonizing than anything it had ever known, pain not only physical but mental as well—logical chimeras that its rational functions could not deal with, self-contradicting structures that one by one overloaded its higher functions, driving it down the asymptotal curve toward total extinction.

It was the best qualified of its race for the job ahead, a creature of vast patience, tact, wit, gentleness, diplomatic skill, culture, and erudition—all the commingled powers had agreed on that, just as they agreed that it was the turn of its race to reach out and bring a benighted alien race out of the darkness of provincial ignorance and into Civilization, just as their own race had been so contacted and assimilated into the galactic community thousands of years before. It had been so *proud* of that, of the responsibility it had been given. But now, it was unraveling in madness and pain, and could *feel* its rational mind dissolving, and could do nothing to stop the process. It felt its higher functions failing, and automatic systems taking over.

The ambassador's race was an ancient and intensely civilized one. Long eons ago, even before contact with the communities of the stars, they had put

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aside their predatory origins, overridden them with a thousand culturally programmed safeguards. They no more felt the age-old archaic urges than a human felt the need to brachiate.

The urges were still there though, ancestral voices whispering in the blood, at the very bottom of the brain, as they must be in every corporeal creature who has evolved from a lower—or at least a more basic—form of life.

One by one, it lost reason, memory, personality; it knew the horror of losing everything that made it itself, and *knowing* it was losing it, and being unable to stop the process. At last, it would lose even the knowledge that something had been *lost,* except for a vague trickle of unease at the back of its consciousness. It would be reduced to survival programming, the underlying atavistic ancestral memory whose human equivalent would be the reptilian hindstem.

From the depths of pain, it had a last fleeting moment of clarity in which to mourn its own passing, and then most of its brain went down.

Glowing like Lucifer falling, it tumbled from the sky, down to the Earth below.

The car battery shorted out. There was a puff of acrid black smoke, and then it was free. Instantly, it reacted. Instinct hurled it *away* from there, away from the trap that had almost killed it, though the window, out into the night.

Outside, alone in the darkness and the swirling snow, with the Northern Lights still a vaguely troubling presence on the horizon, an uneasy prickling sensation that it could now control, it came to the full realization of what it had done.

When she got over the initial shock of hearing the creature speak, Alma Kingsley quickly picked up the ax, bringing it awkwardly around in front of her body so that she could get a better, two-handed grip on it, resting it on her shoulder, ready to swing. She backed away two steps, felt her rear foot bump into the wall, and started to edge sideways again, moving away from the wall a bit (even if it did mean moving a step or two *toward* the monster) so that she'd have room to swing the ax overhand at the creature if it rushed her, a woodchopper's stroke. Couldn't let it pin her against the wall . . .

Kill me, it said again.

She hesitated. She had been figuring out how to do just that, or the best way to try to do it, anyway, deciding that she'd better rush it and try to get a good swing in at it before the big ax grew too heavy for her tired old arms to hold up effectively, do it right *now,* before she lost her nerve. . . . But it kept putting her off her stride by *speaking* to her; she hadn't known that it could talk.

It wasn't "talking" at all, actually—the words seemed to print themselves in her brain somehow, faintly superimposed on reality, like the afterimage of an object you can sometimes see after you close your eyes. But she had no doubt that it was really happening, or that it was the creature who was "speaking" to her.

Go ahead, it said. *Do it now. I won't try to stop you.*

She came forward a couple of steps, and then stopped, hesitating, wary. This was some kind of trick. It was trying to lure her closer so that it could strike at her, maybe counting on being fast enough to be able to dodge any blow of the ax she might get off at it. When she got close enough, it would attack. . . .

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It will not be difficult, it said persuasively. *My physical component is really quite fragile. If you strike at the center of my being hard enough, with something sharp or heavy, that will kill me. That tool you have in your hand will do nicely. I perceive that the handle is made of wood; that will insulate you from any shock. You'll be perfectly safe.*

"You weren't so concerned with my safety a few minutes ago," Alma Kingsley said harshly. "When you were trying to kill me!"

I was insane then, it said. *I have been insane for a long time. But I am insane no longer. The shock that you administered to me has re-integrated my functions. I am sane now.*

"How nice for you!" Rage pulsed through her, and she tightened her grip on the ax. "You unspeakable bastard!"

It shivered convulsively, and she jumped back a step, thinking it was about to attack. But it didn't move forward. *I know what I did,* it said. *I am ready to atone.*

"Atone?" She found herself laughing, harsh, cawing, jagged, ugly laughter that tore her throat. "You killed Jennifer! And Desmond! And . . . and that poor girl!" To her shame, she found she couldn't summon up the young woman's name, although she got a flash of her vapid, cheaply pretty face. "Damn you, you even killed my *dog!*" Tears sprang into her eyes and she blinked them fiercely away. She couldn't allow it to distract her, let it put her off her guard. As soon as she did, it would strike.

I know what I did, it repeated. *That's why you have to kill me.* It was swaying slightly from side to side now, as if in agitation. *Kill me! Strike now! Get it over with. I won't fight you. I know I deserve to die.*

She tried to say something but the words tangled themselves in her throat and wouldn't come out. Her head felt as if it was going to explode, and she was shaking all over. "You're right about that!" she managed to rasp, panting with rage. "You deserve to die a hundred times over!"

It was shaking too, as though stirred by the same inner wind. *I know that,* it said. *I can't live with the guilt and the shame. I was sent here on a mission of peace, to bring you the gifts that would allow you to live as civilized creatures, without war, without want and poverty and hatred. Instead, I killed everyone I met!* It swayed violently. *There could be no worse failure! No worse betrayal of everything that I believe in! Kill me!*

She raised the ax. Images flashed through her mind: Jennifer, her face gray and blistered and burned . . . Iago collapsing in a pathetic jumble of furry limbs . . . the girl, the roadhouse pickup, smiling vapidly although amiably as she dug a fork into her eggs . . . Desmond waving his hands and talking expansively, self-importantly. . . . She was crying openly now, tears running down her face, breathing in harsh gasps through her mouth, but she didn't lose sight of the monster, in spite of the tears. She squeezed the wood of the ax-handle until her hands ached. Abruptly, fiercely, she rushed forward, swinging the ax as far back as she could, ready to bring it crashing down.

A step or two away, she stopped, hesitating, the ax swung high in the air.

It hadn't moved, although she was in easy attack distance by now.

DO IT! it shrieked.

There was a long frozen moment, as though time itself had stopped. For some reason, she found herself thinking about something she hadn't allowed herself to consciously think about for decades: her husband's coffin, shipped by air back from Vietnam, being lowered into a hole dug into the raw red earth on a blustery wet spring morning, a flag draped over it, while people in

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uniform stood stiffly next to the grave and saluted and little Stephanie fidgeted impatiently by her side, too young to understand . . . the incongruously cheerful sound of birds singing somewhere off in the trees (and she realizing how incongruous it was even at the time, and hating herself for noticing something like that at a time like this, no matter how ironic it was) . . . her thinking how much Steve would have hated having his coffin wrapped in a flag, how he would have disliked the solemnity of this whole ceremony, the priest droning pious platitudes about somebody he'd never met and how Steve was now going to walk with Jesus in A Better World . . . looking at her own mother beside her, leaning heavily on Uncle Henry's arm, noticing with a shock how old and frail and tired she looked. . . . The photo that had stood on the mantelpiece in the living room as long as she could remember, her father in a World War II Army uniform, the father she'd never met, a black star on the glass frame, the photo gathering dust for years, never touched, never moved. . . . Her own daughter Stephanie, laughing and hugging her at the airport gate, kissing her husband and her baby goodbye, telling them that she'd send them all postcards and maybe some souvenirs if she could find a moment to steal from the sales conference, only minutes before her airplane was blown to pieces in midair by a terrorist's bomb. . . . The military jets screaming by outside, mean and black and predatory, on the way to the buildup for the *next* war, that would kill somebody *else's* children. . . .

As though it were reading her mind—and who knew, perhaps it was—it said, *The Mission will succeed, even though I failed. Eventually. They will send someone else. It may take another hundred years for them to get here, but eventually they will, and we'll help you heal this world of yours. I have to believe that. Eventually, my failure won't matter. The Mission will succeed.*

Another hundred years. How many children dead in that time, in how many wars?

She heard the sound of a siren, a thin wail still far away, on the edge of hearing. The ambulance coming.

Kill me, it said *You have the right. I owe you that. I have nothing to pay with but my life.*

Suddenly, she was very, very tired, unutterably weary, as though the marrow in her bones had turned to lead.

Hurry. They're coming. Soon it will be too late. Kill me now. Don't hesitate. I want you to do it. I don't want to live. I can't live with what I've done. It hurts too much.

A kind of weary revulsion seized her then, a nauseated rejection of everything and everyone. She stared at the alien for another long moment. "Then *live,* God damn you," she cried bitterly. "Live and be damned!"

She flung the ax aside.

Her legs gave out, and she sat down abruptly on the cold floor. If this was a trick, then it had won. She no longer even cared. Let it kill her if it wanted to.

The wailing siren came closer and closer, the sound cutting sharply through the cold winter air.

One year later, on the anniversary of First Contact at Maple Hill Farm (as the scroll on the screen would say whenever they came back from the commercials), Alma Kingsley sat alone before the television set, listening to herself being praised on CNN. The commentators prattled on and on about the terrible tragedy of the Ambassador's arrival, and of the even greater tragedy that would have occurred had it not been allowed to complete its Mission; one

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commentator, face radiating sincerity the way a pot-bellied stove radiates heat, spoke of Alma Kingsley as a secular saint for forgoing personal revenge for the Sake Of All Mankind.

The Ambassador had tried to attend Jennifer and Desmond's funerals (Candy was buried elsewhere), but she had refused to allow it to attend, to the disappointment of the newsmen, although they were there filming everything in sight anyway, keeping tight close-ups on her face as the last remnants of her family were lowered into the ground, not wanting to miss the slightest nuance of expression. Later, at the UN, the Ambassador had insisted on giving an emotional eulogy for the people he had inadvertently killed, going on to say that Alma Kingsley's greatness of spirit, in being willing to forgive even the very creature who had killed her own granddaughter, all by itself was enough to prove that humanity was worthy of inclusion among the great interstellar Community of Races, and would insure their admission.

Sometimes she wondered if the creature, who was certainly many times smarter than she or any other human being, had *manipulated* her psychologically into deciding not to kill it, using a sly variant of Br'er Rabbit's "Don't Throw Me In the Briar Patch!" routine to get her to act the way it wanted her to act. Certainly it had been easier for it to explain itself to the ambulance crew and the police with her there alive on the scene to vouch for it than it would have been if she were dead, and it was there alone to greet them with a houseful of murdered people at its back. And the forgiveness angle made for great press, just the spin to neutralize the unfortunate fact that the Ambassador had started its career on Earth by killing as many humans as possible. Or maybe it *had* been sincere. Certainly its people *did* seem to be highly ethical, concerned with Justice and Right Actions in a fussy, legalistic, rabbinical way that seemed almost prim. She would never know, one way or the other.

CNN was now running through a quick inventory of all that humanity's new friends had given the Earth so far. Once the Ambassador had used the living fabric of its body to form and trigger an interstellar Gate, new technologies had poured through in a seemingly endless stream: Defensive weapons that really *were* defensive, for they couldn't be used offensively . . . an end to disease . . . medicines to expand the human lifespan a hundred years or more . . . safe and plentiful energy . . . the transmutation of elements . . . gold from lead . . . lilacs from mud . . . silk purses from sows' ears . . . a partridge in a pear tree . . . blah, blah, blah.

They were like children on Christmas morning, with bright wrappings strewn about and nothing but presents as far as the eye could see. To listen to them go on, it seemed that the entire human race was going straight to Heaven. Everybody was going to be healthy and beautiful and tall. They were all going to be transformed into gods.

Except Jennifer. She didn't get to be immortal and go to the stars. She got to lie at the bottom of a grave in Brattleboro, rotting in the cold unforgiving ground, while worms ate her.

Alma Kingsley sat staring at the screen and listening as voices far older than any god spoke within her. Their words were dark and poisonous. They ate at her heart like acid.

She got up and fixed herself another Manhattan. Bitterly, she drank it down, wishing—as she would wish every day for the remaining two hundred years of her life—that she'd killed the damn thing when she had the chance. ○

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ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

Bazaar of the Bizarre

John Shirley's latest album with The Panther Moderns, *Red Star* (Weathered Leather Records, CD), gallops with arsenical brio through vast landscapes of sound like a posse consisting of The Tubes and David Byrne, Devo and Ministry, Mink DeVille and Frank Zappa. Saddle up now!

An energetic and inventive company called GNP Crescendo Records seems to be trying to corner the market for SF instrumental music. Several intriguing new selections from them have teleported this way. Alan Howarth and his magic synclavier produce *Real Hollywood Sound Effects* (GNPD8054, CD), 54 spooky or spacey squibs to supplement your mental movies. Neil Norman and His Cosmic Orchestra weigh in with a self-titled disc (GNPD1409, CD) reprising themes from *The X-Files*, *Babylon 5*, and *Star Wars*, as well as with *Greatest Science Fiction Hits 3* (GNPD2163, CD). Perfect atmosphere for your space age bachelor pad. And finally, *Lost in Space, Volume One* (GNPD8044, CD) and *Volume Two* (GNPD8045, CD) offer stirring nostalgia from composers John Williams, Alexander Courage and Joseph Mullendore, supplemented with informative liner notes and photos.

Return with me now to the thrilling days of space opera's yesteryears by hastening to purchase Old Earth Books' reissues of Doc Smith's Lensman tales (replicas of the famous Fantasy Press volumes). Volume One, *Triplanetary* (trade, $15.00, 287 pages) and Volume Two, *First Lensman* (trade, $15.00, 306 pages) are now available, each sporting words of wry wisdom by a prefatorial John Clute.

Satirical and hip, historically insightful, starring a cast of thousands, *Back in the USSA* (Ziesing Books, hardcover, $29.95, 356 pages) proves that its co-authors, Eugene Byrne and Kim Newman, are the Dudley Moore and Peter Cook of SF. Detailing through a series of linked stories the tragically hilarious saga of a socialist America, circa 1912-1998, this alternate history sets a new standard for gonzo revisionism, mingling Prince Charles with Isaac Asimov, mass-murderer Ed Gein with Buddy Holly. Buy ten copies now, or be labeled a revanchist swine by your local block warden!

Michael Shea is the only author ever permitted to write an official sequel to a Jack Vance book (*A Quest for Simbilis* [1974]). Really, I need say no more to indicate the high caliber of his work. Now, Shea returns to his own saga involving master thief Nifft the Lean (whose previous appearance was in a 1982 eponymous collection) in *The Mines of Behemoth* (Baen Books, mass market, $5.99, 242 pages). Anti-hero Nifft and his partner Barnar find themselves in subterranean pursuit of riches through a milieu worthy of Clark Ashton Smith or Lord Dunsany. With the panache of Avram Davidson, Shea propels his duo through one gruesomely slapstick adventure after another, until their ultimate comeuppance.

Joe Morey and Bobbi Sinha-Morey are small-press folks of the most diligent and craftsmanly stripe. They publish two newszines: *Horror Mag-*

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azine and *The Genre Writer's News*, as well as a slew of books. One of their latest is *Horizon Lines* (Dark Regions Press, trade, $9.95, 176 pages), a collection by Jeffrey Osier. Osier's standout fiction brings to mind Thomas Ligotti and Scott Bradfield, Stepan Chapman and William Browning Spencer. Anchored in sharply limned realism, these stories provide shivers and moral insights in abundance. My favorite: "Why I Dropped out of Art School," which could be aptly illustrated by Dan Clowes. Also available from Dark Regions are five chapbooks of poetry, all $4.95. *Eonian Variations* (36 pages), by Marge Simon; *The Selected Poetry of David Kopaska-Merkel* (42 pages); *The Selected Poetry of Denise Dumars* (40 pages); and *Writhing in Darkness*, by Michael Arnzen, *Volume I* (35 pages) and *Volume II* (32 pages). Fancifully, let's pick one totemic animal from each volume to represent the talents of these poets. Simon might be one of the meerkats in "Elba Dawn." Kopaska-Merkel is the cricket in "After Hours." Dumars is the bull in "Black Tadpoles." And Arnzen is the millipede in "Feelers."

Imagine this career: publication for the first time at age seventy-eight, followed by a couple of decades of relative silence, culminating with a novel released after one's death at ninety-seven. Such was the track record of Vera Chapman, whose Arthurian trilogy *The Three Damosels* (1976) is now followed by *The Notorious Abbess* (Academy Chicago, hardcover, $22.50, 239 pages). These droll and sprightly linked stories about the glamorous white-witch medieval Abbess of Shaston recall the work of Thomas Burnett Swann and James Branch Cabell, while also echoing Joanna Russ. Perhaps most pertinent in terms of tone and effect is Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Kingdoms of Elfin* (1977). This rare find should be on the purchase lists of all lovers of fantasy.

If you crossed the mordant verses of Hilaire Belloc with the high spirits of *Sesame Street*, you might wind up with Tom Disch's *A Child's Garden of Grammar* (University Press of New England, trade, $9.95, 96 pages). These capering, poetry-enshrined grammar lessons, wackily illustrated by Dave Morice, are sprightly enough to be set to music. Conjunction junction, what's your function? Also from UPNE, under the imprint of Wesleyan University Press, comes Samuel Delany's *Longer Views* (hardcover, $22.00, 384 pages). This shimmering collection of man-sized essays incorporates the entire chapbook *Wagner/Artaud* (1988), which lends its themes of music, shifting paradigms and the art of extremes to the entire stimulating volume. Bopping back and forth between high and low cultures, Delany proves once again that he is a liminal Hermes, shining the light of his fusion-powered torch on dark corners of art and living.

From Tachyon Publications come three handsome and eclectic volumes. *The Postmodern Archipelago* (chapbook, $7.50, 66 pages) reprints Michael Swanwick's two *Asimov's* essays, "A User's Guide to the Postmoderns" and "In the Tradition. . . ." Spicy and intelligent, these critical overviews provide a valuable snapshot of our field at one flash-frozen moment. Also from the pages of *Asimov's* comes Nancy Kress's novella *Dancing on Air* (trade, $10.00, 80 pages), with an afterword by James Patrick Kelly. Like Walter Miller's "The Darfsteller," Kress's work follows the future of an artform through ethical quagmires. Tachyon's most exciting offering is Peter Beagle's *The Rhinoceros Who Quoted Nietzsche* (trade, $14.00, 183 pages). Gathering up much of Beagle's rare short fiction, as well as some juvenil-

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ia and journalism, this collection proves just how essential Beagle is to modern fantasy. Without Beagle's early example we'd have no Blaylock or Powers, that's for sure. And let's not slight the value of Beagle's heart-piercing fiction standing on its own. A story like "The Naga" is worthy of inclusion in the *Arabian Nights*.

Those psychotronic buzzbombers at FC2—who recently drew down the wrath of Jesse Helms for their Doug Rice book—now deliver a pair of "postfeminist chick-lit" collections. The stories in Cris Mazza's *Former Virgin* (trade, $11.95, 145 pages) read like Carol Emshwiller tales as filmed by Mike Leigh. For the most part, they are not overtly fantastical, yet carry the same weight of weirdness as a David Lynch film. "Dog and Girlfriend" depicts a seeming metamorphosis between the two entities of the title, while "Copterport on Coswell's Mountain" plays strange tricks with memories. For caustic dialogue and keen dissections of human foibles, this is your choice. The stories in Lily James's collection *The Great Taste of Straight People* (trade, $8.95, 194 pages) are more devoutly surreal than Mazza's. Veering from laugh-out-loud ("Blanket Stealers and the Women Who Love Them") to horrific ("Vivisection, Vicisection, Where's Your Erection?"), they are a cross between Donald Barthelme and Joan Jett. James could be FC2's answer to Sandra Bernhard.

The ineffable Don Webb returns from below the Planck level with *Stealing My Rules* (Cyber-Psychos AOD, trade, $5.00, 71 pages). Since I was fortunate enough to be asked to write the introduction to this volume (the punctures from the Iron Maiden are almost all healed now, thank you), I'll simply say that you owe it to yourself to pour the Oil of Webb straight into your astral ear. C-PAOD also offers three additional new titles. *Stigma: Afterword* (trade, $5.00, 66 pages), by Jeffrey Stadt, is a novella that illuminates from the inside out its mad characters trapped in a vampiric group home. Michael Hemmingson's horrific stories in *Snuff Flique* (trade, $5.00, 102 pages) outgun Jim Thompson and the splatterpunks combined. And S. Darnbrook Colson's *The Hanging Man* (trade, $5.00, 63 pages) dramatizes the limits of revenge in a future when humanity is reduced to the ethics of a wolf pack.

Linda Addison pours heart and soul upon the page in her first collection, *Animated Objects* (Space and Time, trade, $7.95, 110 pages). A freshet of poems, journal entries, and stories, this book shows the birth and early maturity of the author. Most affecting to my sensibilities was her "Dust to Dust," which exactly recaptures—not, I believe, out of conscious homage, but out of similar soul-stirrings—Lord Dunsany's "Where the Tides Ebb and Flow." Think it's easy writing a story from a corpse's point of view? Only because Addison beguiles you so.

Michael Andre-Driussi, whose previous *Lexicon Urthus* (1994) was a concordance to Gene Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun*, now offers *Vance Space* (Sirius Fiction, chapbook, $5.00, 52 pages), "A Rough Guide" to several corners of the exotic universe of Jack Vance, complete with maps and timeline. If you want to know the preferred taste in music on Eiselbar or the logic of the whip-dances of Dar Sai, consult this handbook immediately!

Carla Sinclair is the Stealth bomber of novelists. Equipped with the latest in counter-detection gear that makes her resemble a simple zine editor (*bOING-bOING*) and journalist, she now slips in under our radar and delivers a witty and sardonic fiction-bomb in the shape of *Signal to Noise* (Harper*Edge*, hard-

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cover, $22.50, 295 pages). Sinclair's book begins as a gossamer-veiled account of life at San Francisco's hip cyber-journal, *Signal* magazine (a.k.a. *Wired*), then segues into a James Crumley-style thriller. Written with the mimetic precision of a Tom Wolfe or Dickens, it manages to skewer certain trendoids and their lifestyles while still delivering plenty of thugs'n'drugs action. While expertly charting the decline and fall of Jim Knight, *Signal* editor, and the rise and bloat of Kat Astura, Gen-X dreamer, Sinclair's novel also offers the fun of identifying under their disguises such real-life figures as R.U. Sirius, Nicholas Negroponte, Douglas Coupland and John Perry Barlow. If Pohl and Kornbluth had written this book in the fifties, it would now be an SF classic. As it stands, it's a window onto a weird colony similar to a den of naked mole rats, whose actions are hypnotically repulsive, alluringly decadent.

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Dogbody

I know I've run this rap before, so skip ahead to the next paragraph if you're tired of hearing it, but I need to say it once again. American Contemporary Fantasy has never shone so brightly or been more vividly entrancing than today. In the glowing crucible stirred by alchemists such as Liz Hand, Jonathan Carroll, Richard Grant, John Crowley, Charles de Lint, James Blaylock, Lisa Goldstein, Terry Bisson, Tim Powers, and Gene Wolfe, our homegrown brand of magical realism has evolved into something truly splendid. We should all hold our heads high, having fostered such a mighty changeling from within the genre.

The occasion for this latest paean is Will Shetterly's *Dogland* (Tor, hardcover, $25.95, 445 pages). On the basis of this one book, you can safely add Shetterly's name to the list above. This novel succeeds remarkably on a number of levels: as mimetic autobiography (the flap copy tells us of Shetterly's association with a real Dogland), as depiction of a fantastic midsummer dreamscape, and as Arthurian reenactment. There's not a false step from the evocative opening paragraph, an invitation I bet will lure you as it did me:

> It was a dream, then a place, then a memory. My father built it near the Suwannee River. I like to think it was the heart of Florida, because it was, and is, in my heart. Its name was Dogland.

Join the Nix family—parents Luke and Susan, oldest boy Chris, middle kid Letitia (Little Bit) and baby George (Digger) as they cross half the continent in the year 1959 to homestead a patch of Florida land—just down the road from the Fountain of Youth Hotel and under the shade of

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what might be the World Tree Yggdrasil—where Luke's dream of Dogland will become reality: a petting-zoo-type tourist attraction featuring every breed of dog that exists. Narrated by Chris in a voice naïve on the surface, yet with sophisticated depths, a voice that only occasionally lets slip a retroactive adult observation, this book covers a mere three years in the life of the Nixes (nixies?). But these three years are so seminal for Chris (and hence for us), so filled with mundanely magical events, that they might be a chronicle of some period of high adventure, where every day brings earth-shattering moments that test the soul and will.

Having grown up precisely co-temporally with Chris, I can testify to the accuracy of Shetterly's depiction of the America of some forty years ago. Without tossing in a surplus of cultural icons, Shetterly manages to evoke a world now vanished. In areas such as racial tumult, he precisely nails the feelings and dilemmas of the nation. The Nixes and the supporting cast are all distinct individuals, yet carry the burden of their varied archetypes without breaking. As the action alternates between quiet yet revelatory moments and life-threatening crises (the Nixes's final brush with personal Armageddon is nicely paralleled by the Cuban Missile Showdown), the reader is swept along as if a child herself again.

Shetterly's major accomplishment here is something no other contemporary fantasy has ever done quite as well. There is an absolute bivalency in this book between fantasy and non-fantasy interpretations. In his essay "Atlantis Rose . . ." from *Longer Views*, Delany speaks of fiction which in less liberal times chose to permit both hetero- and homosexual readings. Shetterly has impeccably carried off this same stunt with regards to natural/supernatural readings, walking a tightrope of monofilament string. Does a woman-turned-manatee rescue Chris from drowning? Is banker Nick Lumiere the Devil himself? Can Little Bit read minds? Do Jesus's parents visit Dogland, shortly after Odin and crew? Well, yes and no. You will find absolutely no partiality in Shetterly's text. The ultimate interpretation depends on your own heart.

The Ted Sturgeon of *The Dreaming Jewels* (1950) might have written this book. But only Will Shetterly did.

Beyond the Cauchy Horizon

Mind-croggling. That's the only word for John Cramer's *Einstein's Bridge* (Avon, hardcover, $23.00, 354 pages). Here we have a book that starts out like Benford's *Timescape* (1980), warps halfway through into Pellegrino and Zebrowski's *The Killing Star* (1995), then ends tonally like Ian Wallace's *Croyd* (1967). Plainly, there's enough meat here to satisfy anybody's sense of wonder.

Cramer is a physicist who teaches in Seattle and does research at the CERN facility in Switzerland. (He's also dad to one of our field's finer anthologist-editor-critics, Kathryn, proving that genes do count.) His first book was the novel *Twistor* (1989), which, while competent and entertaining, provided little hint of this new book. *Twistor* concerned two young present-day researchers who discover how to translate matter out of our universe into a shadow plane of existence. A trifle clunky in terms of dialogue and scene-setting, the book read like early John Stith. Its central idea never blossomed into full weirdness (See Bob Shaw's *A Wreath of Stars* [1976] for a similar riff more deftly exploited), but its verisimilitudinous treatment of lives spent in science was exemplary. In a retroactive way, *Twistor* can now be read as the slightly plodding obverse of Jonathan Lethem's *As She Climbed Across the Table* (1997).

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Einstein's Bridge occupies a higher quantum ledge entirely. It zips and zags and surprises, throwing off GeV-level ideas along a dozen vectors. The book opens in what we quickly perceive is an alternate timeline. On this fictional Earth, the canceled Superconducting Super Collider in Waxahachie, Texas, exists as an operating reality. Is this merely an arbitrary plot device so that a physicist can write about his pet project? Not at all: the SSC *has* to be in place so that Cramer can use the machine to host the open end of a wormhole launched from a neighboring bubble universe. There, I *thought* that would get your attention. This anomalous event within the SSC certainly attracts the attention of physicists George Griffin and Roger Coulton. Along with visiting reporter/novelist Alice Lancaster, they quickly establish contact with the aliens on the other end of the wormhole. And in the space of the next few days, all hell breaks loose. How our protagonists survive and thrive, I shall keep secret.

Cramer delivers the expected authentic insights into "the culture of particle physics" without heavy-handedness. He speculates intelligently on the future of virtual reality and bioengineering of a fantastic sort. He plays games with history in an intelligent and perceptive manner. And he portrays the transformation of Griffin and Coulton into something more than human with empathy. This book truly reflects what Cramer describes in his acknowledgments as years of revision and rethinking.

Like Fred Hoyle, John Cramer proves that "staid and stuffy" are not words that apply to his brand of science or science fiction.

The Ballad of Reading Gaol

Is it too farfetched to suggest that certain SF writers are influenced as much by Austen, the Brontë sisters, and Dumas, as by Gernsback and Wells? Consider the writings of Sarah Ash, Felicity Savage, R. A. MacAvoy, Caroline Stevermer, and Joan Vinge. To my mind, there's some affinity between these SF authors and the titans of the "romance" tradition—in all senses of that quote-marked word. Concerned with society and manners as much as science and antimatter, these writers like to focus on sensitive, larger-than-life heroes and heroines in exotic settings. The SF subgenre of planetary romance offers a perfect mode for their concerns, and perhaps Leigh Brackett might be adduced as a patron saint.

Newcomer Katie Waitman seems to fit happily into this lineage. Her zippy and zestful first novel, *The Merro Tree* (Del Rey, mass-market, $5.99, 437 pages) combines the rags-to-riches interstellar plotting of Heinlein's *Citizen of the Galaxy* (1957) with the empurpled feyness of Thomas Burnett Swann's Grecian fantasies. In addition, issues of censorship and the balance between artistic perks and responsibilities are intelligently examined. Not much more could be required for a promising debut.

Waitman's galactic milieu has just enough borrowed coherence from consensus SF to acceptably recede into the background of the story, which is where it belongs. Colorful aliens, some humanoid, some exotic (Waitman's succinct descriptions demand Freas illos), and newbie humans mingle on various FTL-linked worlds. Citizens everywhere are entertained by touring troupes of actors and singers and other performers, in the manner of Jack Vance's *Space Opera* (1965) or Barry Longyear's *Circus World* (1981). Fewer than a thousand of these entertainers are "performance masters," experts in every skill. Mikk, our extraterrestrial but humanoid hero, is one such. We

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follow him from unwanted child to accomplished adult. A combination of Harry Houdini, Edith Piaf, Oscar Wilde, and Nijinsky, Mikk eventually finds himself mated by kismet to a "serassi" companion, who just happens to be a giant serpentine alien male named Thissizz. Defying conventions against interspecies sex, Mikk and Thissizz, thanks to their talents, enjoy a tenuous immunity from censure, until Mikk contravenes a lawful ruling that would circumscribe his art, and is jailed. Waitman intersperses the realtime trial of Mikk with his backstory in a deft fashion, prolonging the surprise of the outcome.

One recent planetary romance that seems a definite influence on *The Merro Tree* is Silverberg's *Lord Valentine's Castle* (1980). From the juggling motif to the petite servant Maya (who recalls Silverberg's little Vroon character), Waitman appears to have learned from Silverberg how to propel a "family" of colorful sidekicks and their centripetal master down thrilling paths.

In the end, Waitman's book justifies its existence just as Mikk does: "He and his work could not be explained by law or logic . . . his meaning [was] mystery, beauty and open boundaries of conscious life."

Watermargins

Is it a foolish quibble to distinguish between parallel worlds and alternate ones? I think not. Alternate worlds are most often posited as ones that have split off from our given plenum at some easily locatable point: branches of might-have-been history. In contrast, parallel worlds were never connected to ours, yet somehow through convergent evolution share bits and pieces of our culture, mixed with unique features. Poul Anderson's *Midsummer Tempest* (1974) and Mary Gentle's *Rats and Gargoyles* (1990) are parallel creations, while Keith Roberts's *Pavane* (1968)—which seems cut from the same fabric as the others—is an alternate extrapolation. Given their congenital disconnect from our world, tales of parallel venues are more frequently fantasy than SF.

In two recent books, Michael Williams has created a parallel world of surpassing heft and attractiveness, one that veers from the standard heroic fantasy in a bold and intelligent manner. Anyone who enjoyed the Anderson or Gentle titles named above should track down this open-ended duology.

Arcady (1996) introduced us to what feels like a pocket universe. (Hints in this volume and the next point toward a post-apocalypse rationale for Williams's creation, but because of its isolation and smallness, I prefer to picture it as a self-sufficent bubble of strangeness.) Williams's world—at least as depicted to date—is limited to four small provinces—Urthona, Tharmas, Luvah, and Urizen—straddling the quintessentially Coleridgian "River Alph." Sporadic, incessant warfare between the forces of the land's ruler, Citizen Arouet, and ragtag rebels takes place amidst a shifting landscape defined by Presences (stable patches), Borders (the interface zones), and Absences (whirlpools of cosmic discontinuity). A great estate called Arcady, home to the Hawken clan, where sphinxes and dryads roam, is our focus. Suddenly threatened by an anomalous roving Absence, the estate and its residents call back several scattered Hawkens, including the main protagonist, Solomon, failed priest. And from what sacred text does Solomon preach? Why, the misprisioned works of Blake and Milton, with a little Keats thrown in. How Solomon dares the Absences to save Arcady and his relatives is this book's tale.

Allamanda (Roc, trade, $13.95, 417 pages) is the sequel. Our view-

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point character this time is Garrick Hawken, Solomon's nephew and heir to a crumbling Arcady. It eventuates that Solomon's perilous rescue of the estate, after his confrontation with the malicious intelligence at the heart of the Absences, was only temporary. Seven years down the line, the Hawkens are forced to flee to Allamanda, the estate tenanted by some disagreeable relatives. There, Garrick plots the reconquest of Arcady, while simultaneously pursuing the hand of his mysterious cousin Flora. Through many a stirring trial, Garrick will attain a partially satisfying victory.

The technology of this Blakean milieu is steam and musket, hand-operated printing presses and hot-air balloons. Its magic is that of Blake's prophetic poetry, copiously and cleverly quoted, reified in the aura of the Borders. Cromwellian warfare, hearthside treacheries, boozy daydreaming, deadly masques, philosophical quests, and bumpkin slapstick are the beads on the necklace of the plot in both books. Williams opts for sharply rendered characters and family dynamics over thud and blunder, and soon such figures as the plucky city lad Willie Melmoth, the hot-headed soldier Diego Hawken, and angel-haunted Aunt Morgana (whose fate is to become an angel herself) assume a rare solidity.

Employing finely honed prose fully fit to stand shoulder to shoulder with Blake's own verses, Williams has fashioned a series that rivals Peter Greenaway's film *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982) for elegant oddity.

The Haunts of Memory and Conjecture

Can you name a British horror writer who debuted in the eighties with some stunning short stories, then went on to release several creepy novels? If you named Clive Barker, I wouldn't be surprised. He's the high-profile answer to my question. But I'd rather focus now on the more shadowy figure of Patrick McGrath, who also fits the bill. While McGrath has received plenty of attention outside our genre, he seems a less well-known figure within, and that's a shame. McGrath's accomplishments in the "New Gothic" vein are fresh and disturbing as a maliciously spaded grave, and will reward your attention. But first, a brief justification for McGrath's presence in the pages of an SF magazine. If, as Brian Aldiss avers, science fiction was born from the Gothic surgery of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), then study of contemporary Gothic works should cast interesting highlights on modern, yet still Gothic-descended strategies of SF tale-telling. And besides, good writing of any fantastic stripe is always welcome here!

McGrath's only volume of short stories to date was also his first book: *Blood and Water* (1988). Among his books, this volume contains the highest quotient of actual supernatural doings. Its entries range from the facetious ("Hand of a Wanker") to the chilling (the title story). Right off the belfry bat, McGrath exhibited a clear affinity to several writers: Ian McEwan, Edward Gorey, Thomas Disch, Robert Bloch, Lovecraft, Poe, and M. R. James most notably. Yet his subdued and impeccable prose—trembling between anguish and catatonia—was instantly recognizable as his own. Perhaps more vitally, what emerged from this book was a trademark range of concerns—obsessions, if you will—and also certain favored angles of attack. The story "The Angel" holds almost all of McGrath's future work in embryo: a highly unreliable narrator, confusion of past and present, distrust of the body, imagination supplementing minimal facts, and an affirmation that self-knowledge is no defense

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against tragedy. Additionally, McGrath's deepest sympathies are shown—despite his residence in contemporary New York—to bloom most lushly in En-gland's recent past.

The Grotesque (1989) would make a wonderful Hitchcock film, a macabre blending of *Fawlty Towers* and *Cold Comfort Farm*. Sir Hugo Coal is the vituperative and cruel lord of Crook Manor, circa 1949. Tyrannizing over his wife and daughter and her week-kneed suitor, Sir Hugo does not reckon with the wiles of his secret antagonist, the butler Fledge. Stumbling into murder, Sir Hugo becomes the monster of the title, "a creature whose one stark message is: see how close *you* are to grotesquerie." Illustrating the evils of willful self-isolation (another McGrath theme), this novel remains the most cynically humorous in McGrath's canon. Future works will grow darker.

Spider (1990) is probably McGrath's masterpiece to date, not excluding his newest book, dealt with below. The first-person account of the life of madman Dennis Cleg—dubbed Spider because of his gangling frame—this book brilliantly carries the uncertainty principle to its illogical limits. Every fact that Spider touches becomes subject to readerly doubt. Did Spider's boorish father murder Spider's mother when she discovered his illicit love affair, or did Spider himself kill her? How many mothers *did* he have? Were Spider's past twenty years spent in Canada or an asylum? Is Spider subject to evil plottings by his landlady and the uncanny creatures that cavort in her attic in London's East End in the year 1957? As in the Shetterly title reviewed above, no stringent univalent reading is possible. By the end of this book, it's possible even to argue that Spider is his own father!

The brief biography included on McGrath's books indicates that his father was a doctor, a superintendent in charge of Broadmoor Hospital for many years during McGrath's youth. This early life experience resonates throughout McGrath's third and fourth novels.

The limping doctor archetype who appeared in *Spider* now assumes center stage in *Dr. Haggard's Disease* (1993). From his lonely estate of Elgin (a more elegant yet still haunted counterpart of Crook Manor in *The Grotesque*), during the beginning of World War II, the crippled Edward Haggard narrates his tragic romance with Fanny Vaughan, wife of a fellow doctor, now dead. Fleeing mentally from past to present to past for consolation, yet finding no relief anywhere, Haggard becomes involved with Fanny's son, James, who bears a striking resemblance to his mother. Eventually, Haggard's lovelorn delusions and morphine addiction overcome his common sense, and he begins a weird courtship of the son in place of the deceased mother. In this book, McGrath reveals a new kinship: with J. G. Ballard. The very name of "James Vaughan" (remember that Vaughan was the protagonist of *Crash* [1973]), as well as Vaughan's job of Spitfire pilot, point toward the climax of crumpled flesh and burning machinery.

I'd like to report that McGrath's newest novel, *Asylum* (Random House, hardcover, $22.00, 254 pages) is his best, but honesty forbids. It's an affecting, at times truly harrowing work, but in the end seems relatively uninspired, a kind of base camp for future assaults on higher peaks.

Peter Cleave is our unreliable narrator this time around. A doctor at an English sanitarium in the year 1959, he recounts the transgressive love affair between Stella Raphael, the spouse of a fellow doc-

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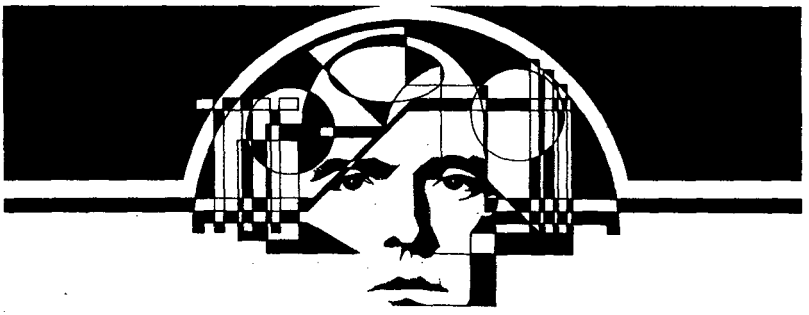
tor, and a patient, the mad, wife-murdering sculptor Edgar Stark. Cleave is a cold fish who is partially responsible for the tragedy he details, and he is overly confident both of his conjectures and his diagnoses. But the literary problem is that he is not evil in any sense of the word. He never assumes the Byronic stature of McGrath's other narrators. Additionally, the progression of events here is resolutely, even stultifyingly linear, a surprise given McGrath's predilection for convoluted time-hopping.

The actual story of Stella and Edgar's doomed romance is involving in a subdued way. Like James M. Cain's noirish lovers, the pair defy fate and society in a selfish yet somehow noble manner. Like D. H. Lawrence, McGrath shows how lust and boredom can play havoc with the morality of a repressive era. And as in William Browning Spencer's *Maybe I'll Call Anna* (1990), the penalties for taking a mentally unstable lover, the infectious nature of insanity, are grimly depicted. In the final assessment, however, *Asylum* is like the mock scholarly preface to Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) without the actual novel attached. It seems certain, however, that a writer of McGrath's talents will recover quickly from such a minor misstep.

If this brush with the Gothic intrigued you, then you should demand your local library purchase *The St. James Guide to Horror, Ghost & Gothic Writers* (St. James Press, hardcover, $95.00, 746 pages). Edited by the sagacious David Pringle, with entries by such fine critics as Don D'Ammassa, Brian Stableford, and Mike Ashley, this well-written, comprehensive roadmap of all things spooky complements the earlier St. James SF and Fantasy Guides, forming a trio of indispensable references for aficionados of the fantastic in all its forms. ○



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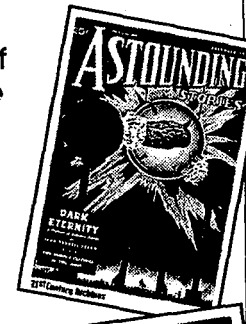

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

We still have lots of conventions from now till WorldCon. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 13107B Autumn Woods Way, Fairfax VA 22033. The hot line is (703) 449-1276. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons) leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, playing a musical keyboard.— Erwin S. Strauss

JULY 1998

10–12—**Toronto Trek.** For info, write: **65 Front St. W., Suite 0116, Box 187, Toronto ON M5J 1E6.** Or phone: **(416) 410-8266** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Toronto ON (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Regal Constellation Hotel. Guests will include: none announced at press time. Canada's flagship Star Trek event.

10–12—**ReaderCon.** Marriott, Westborough MA. B. Sterling, L. Goldstein, Clement, Schweitzer, Swanwick. Written SF.

10–12—**ConJuration. (573) 446-8919. (E-mail) conjure@gte.net.** Days Inn, Columbia MO. Lawrence Watt-Evans, G. Bear.

10–12—**ConCussion. (402) 483-4743. (E-mail) concussion@binary.net.** Holiday Inn NW, Omaha NE. That's all, at press.

10–12—**Infinity.** Angel Hotel, Cardiff, Wales. C. Baker, Duane, Moorwood, Bishop, Prowse, Fanthorpe, Cohen, Banks.

10–12—**KingCon. (506) 658-1724. (506) 672-3955. (E-mail) ovilajar@nbnet.nb.com.** Keddy's Hotel, St. John NB.

15–20—**MythCon.** Wheaton College, Wheaton IL. P. Ford, Christopher, Edwards. Celebrating C. S. Lewis' centenary.

17–19—**LibertyCon. (615) 847-4005.** Radisson Read House, Chattanooga TN. Lubov, Wendy Webb, W. A. (Bob) Tucker.

17–19—**ConVersion. (403) 279-4052. (E-mail) garyf@nucleus.com.** Coast Plaza Hotel, Calgary AB. J. Michael Straczynski.

17–19—**Nexus. (+44 [0] 117) 940-9017.** Hilton National Hotel, Bristol England. Richard Arnold. Star Trek.

17–19—**NewPacifiCon. (708) 209-1426. (AOL) edenproject.** Airport Holiday Inn, Cincinnati OH. For Earth 2 fans.

17–19—**CastleCon. (301) 292-5231. (E-mail) bruce@fantek.org.** Holidome, Frederick MD. General weirdness and fun.

17–19—**ComiCon. (608) 226-0200.** Horizon, Rosemont IL. Claudia Christian. One of the year's biggest comics meets.

18–19—**Visions. (508) 896-7448.** Bayside Expo Center, Boston MA. Emphasis on media SF and fantasy.

24–26—**DiversiCon, Box 8036, Lake St. Stn., Minneapolis MN 55408. (612) 825-9353. (E-mail) diversicon@scc.net.** Fowler.

24–26—**StarQuest, Box 20066, Castro Valley CA 94546. (E-mail) chairman@starquest.org.** Doubletree, San Jose CA. Media.

24–26—**Legacy, Box 728, Armona CA 93202. (E-mail) paladin@kingsnet.com.** Radisson & Conv. Center, Visalia CA. Media.

24–26—**VidCon, Box 2076, Riverview FL 33569. (813) 677-6347.** Camberley Plaza, Tampa FL. Adult media fanzines.

24–27—**Con, Box 4602, Portland OR 97208. (503) 797-2679.** Greenwood Inn, Beaverton OR. S. Perry. "Generic SF con."

25–26—**Wolf 359, 141 Warden Rd., Canvey Island SS8 9BE, UK. (01753) 771-078.** Radisson Heathrow, London UK. Media.

31–Aug. 2—**RebelCon, 10 Rankin St., Worcester MA 01605. (800) 997-3235.** Holiday Inn, Taunton MA. Straczynski.

31–Aug. 2—**RiverCon, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40268. (AOL) riverconsf.** Executive West. Turtledove, Clement, Tates.

31–Aug. 2—**WestCon, 46 Brins Close, Stoke Gifford, Bristol BS12 6XU, UK. (+44 [0] 117) 940-9017.** B. Morse, Z. Merton. Media.

AUGUST 1998

1–2—**StarCon, Box 2037, San Bernardino CA 92406. (909) 880-8558.** Convention Center, Pasadena CA. Media.

1–2—**Navigator, c/o Witting, Algatan 7, Saltsjobaden S-13344, Sweden. (E-mail) wolf@it.kth.se.** Theme: English fandom.

5–9—**Bucconeer, Box 314, Annapolis Junction MD 20701. (410) 534-8136.** WorldCon. $165 at the door.

AUGUST 1999

26–29—**Conucopia, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409.** Anaheim CA. Pournelle. The North American SF Con (NASFiC). $70.

SEPTEMBER 1999

2–6—**AussieCon 3, Box 266, Prospect Heights IL 60070.** Melbourne, Australia. Gregory Benford. The WorldCon. US$155.

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TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

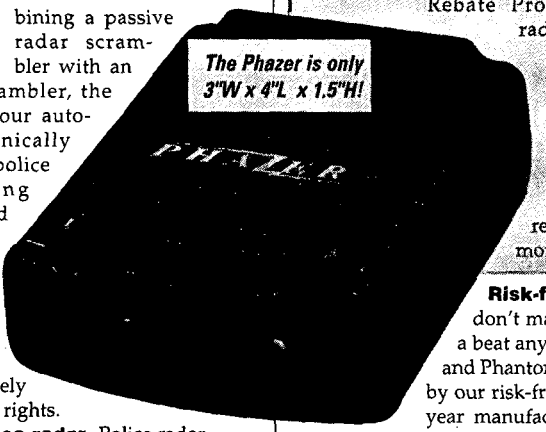
How to make your car invisible to radar and laser

Rocky Mountain Radar introduces a device guaranteed to make your car electronically "invisible" to speed traps—if you get a ticket while using the product, the manufacturer will pay your fine!

As speed-detection technology has gotten more and more advanced, speeding tickets have become virtually unavoidable. And although devices exist that enable motorists to detect these speed traps, they are outlawed in many states... including mine.

■ ***The Phazer will "jam" both radar and laser guns, preventing police from measuring your speed.***

The solution. Combining a passive radar scrambler with an active laser scrambler, the Phazer makes your automobile electronically "invisible" to police speed-detecting equipment. And unless you are a resident of Minnesota, Oklahoma or Washington, D.C., using the Phazer is completely within your legal rights.



How it scrambles radar. Police radar takes five to 10 measurements of a vehicle's speed in about one second. The Phazer sends one signal that tells the radar the car is going 15 m.p.h. and another signal that the car is going 12 m.p.h. Because police radar can't verify the speed, it displays no speed at all.

Works with laser, too! The Phazer also protects your vehicle from Lidar guns that use the change in distance over time to detect a vehicle's speed. The Phazer uses light-emitting diodes (LEDs) to fire invisible infrared pulses through the windshield. Laser guns interpret those pulses as a false indication of the car's distance, blocking measurement of your speed.

Encourage responsible driving. While the Phazer *is* designed to help you (and me) avoid speed traps, it *is not* intended to condone excessive speeding. For that reason, within the first year, the manufacturer will pay tickets where the speed limit was not exceeded by more than 30%, or 15 miles per hour, whichever is less.

Double protection from speed traps. If the Phazer sounds good, but you prefer to be *notified* when you are in range of a police radar, the Phantom is for you. The Phantom combines the Phazer (including the Ticket Rebate Program) with a radar detector. It's legal in every state except Minnesota, Oklahoma, Virginia and Washington, D.C. Ask your representative for more details!

Risk-free. Speed traps don't make my heart skip a beat anymore. The Phazer and Phantom are both backed by our risk-free trial and three-year manufacturer's warranty. Try them, and if you're not satisfied, return your purchase within 90 days for a "No Questions Asked" refund.

The Phazer:
Three credit-card payments of $66.50 $14 S&H

The Phantom:
Three credit-card payments of $116.50 $18 S&H

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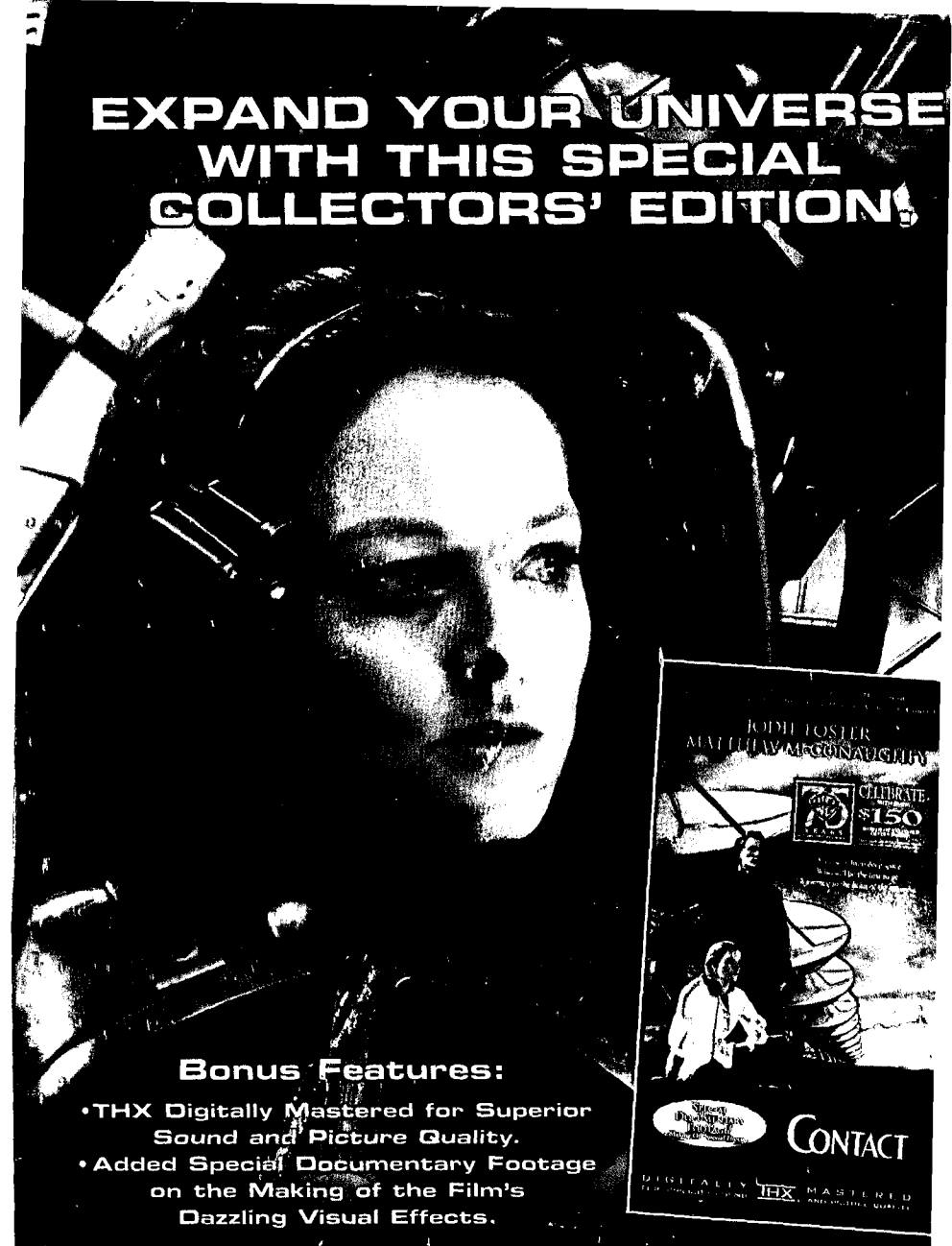

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